

## Media News and Reporting



# Media News and Reporting

*A guide for beginning journalists*

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ADAPTATION BY ARAPAHOE COMMUNITY COLLEGE



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By Joelle Milholm

It's quite possible that every generation has thought that they lived in the most interesting time, which made it the most important time to be a journalist. When the United States was becoming a country and fighting for independence against the British, the colonists used the press to spread information and build support for independence. Civil Rights movements from abolitionists fighting to end slavery, to women battling for the right to vote, to Native Americans fighting for self-determination, and many more, communities have used traditional newspapers and other media outlets and created their own to lift up their voices and spread information.

For years, newspapers, radio, and broadcast TV, and all the journalists who worked for them were some of the most trusted voices in the country. Not only that, but investigative journalists and whistleblowers were exposing problems and “speaking truth to power” to hold the government, corporations, and those in power accountable. In the last 50 years, the news media has faced a revolution of its own with CNN paving the way for cable news

and the 24/7 news cycle, the internet democratizing information and limiting traditional gatekeepers, social media gobbling up advertising dollars to force layoffs and small newspaper closures of epic proportions, and the current onslaught of information and disinformation making the world a harder place to understand.

With reports showing a growing distrust in media, like a [2021 Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford](#) that shows Americans' trust in the media at 29% – lowest out of 46 countries surveyed – the media and news landscaped has changed. Some people believe “alternative facts,” despite the ridiculousness of the phrase. Facts are facts. The truth still matters. And it's the job of journalists to find those facts and report the truth – whether they are doing it for a school newspaper, on social media, or for a podcast. People still need to read and hear about the truth. Whether it's about what's going on at a local school board meeting, or how a federal program is impacting homelessness, or an amazing new business that opened, or a great feature on a new artist who is making waves in the art world, these stories matter. They help people have a greater understanding of the world around them and of what's going on in their community. These stories help individuals feel like a part of their community. Finding, researching, fact-checking, and telling these stories is vital, not only for a healthy democracy, but for our humanity.

The job of a journalist is amazing. They get to take their curiosity into the world, find answers, and then explain that information to others. It requires curiosity, determination, a willingness to show up and find out what is going on, creativity in finding the best way to tell that story, and a commitment to get it right. Journalists make mistakes, just like everyone else. It's a hard job, but it's also rewarding. The job of a journalist is much like that of Spiderman: With great power, comes great responsibility.

This book is here to help you learn more about journalism, more about how to find and gather information, how to conduct interviews, how to arrange that information to present to others, how to follow the laws of privacy and be an ethical journalist with

integrity. There are all sorts of guides to help you navigate challenging situations and learn different techniques that will transform to the real world. It won't have everything. Reading local and national newspapers, listening to podcasts, and watching local and national news can also help you better understand the journalism world. A lot of times, it just takes getting out there and trying it. This book aims to give you the confidence to do that.

One of the best parts about journalism is that anyone can do it. If you want to join this world, it would love to have you. You don't have to get a license or certification to "become a journalist." You just need to have a desire to better understand the world around you and a longing to share that information with others. This is the greatness of a free press. In our current world, there is an assault on the truth and a growing distrust in journalists. This book will help us to understand why that trust is so important in a democracy and how following these tips can help you become a trusted source of information. Regardless of what people said in the past, this is the best time to enter the field of journalism. There is so much to do. Let's get started.

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# I. Chapter I: Introduction to Journalism

## From NYU Journalism Handbook for Students

### [NYU Journalism Handbook for Students](#)

Ethics, Law and Good Practice

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By Prof. Adam L. Penenberg

**REVISED 2020**

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## OVERVIEW (Edited for ACC by Joelle Milholm)

As a journalism student enrolled at Arapahoe Community College, you are part of a community of scholars and people dedicated to telling the truth, while helping new journalists practice and develop their skills. A scholar's mission is to push forward the boundaries of knowledge; a journalist's mission is to serve the public by seeking and reporting the facts as accurately as possible. Good journalists and scholars share a commitment to the same principle: integrity in their work. A doctor's ethos is, "do no harm." Ours is, "tell the truth."

The NYU Journalism Faculty created this handbook to address issues that might arise during the course of a semester. The aim is for this handbook to be descriptive, prescriptive and pedagogical. In journalism, ethical problems—with some obvious exceptions such as plagiarism and fabricating sources and material—can rarely be solved with yes or no, do or don't answers. Whenever an ethical or legal issue arises, students should review this handbook, consult with a professor or both. The best defense against crossing ethical or legal lines is openness and honesty.

By its very nature this handbook cannot go into great depth on any one subject. ACC offers a journalism guaranteed-transfer degree to give you a beginning overview into the discipline and be able to build your knowledge and skills, while also being part of an award-winning, student-managed and run online newspaper. The goal is that by the time you transfer to a 4-year institution, you will be a junior and ready to take more in-depth and focused classes on journalism innovation, ethics, law, and more.

## INTRODUCTION

America's founders saw the press as an indispensable part of the democratic republic they created. The protections of the First

Amendment for speaking and publishing would produce a vigorous marketplace of ideas and enable citizens to hold public officials and public figures accountable for their actions. James Madison saw press freedom as critical to upholding all individual rights in the Constitution. In one of the most [powerful defenses](#) ever of a free press, Madison wrote in 1800 that the First Amendment protected the “right of freely examining public characters and measures, and of free communication among the people thereon, which has ever been justly deemed the only effectual guardian of every other right.”

While the First Amendment protects the rights of the press, it does not automatically confer credibility on journalists themselves. That has to be earned every day in the hard work of covering news and public affairs—especially in a time of [sharp attacks](#) by politicians, cries of “fake news,” and widespread public doubt about the fairness of press coverage.

The credibility of individual journalists and the press itself depends in large part on a rigorous adherence to ethical practices. That starts with dedication to the pursuit of truth and integrity in everyday reporting and writing. Plagiarism, fabrication, deliberate misrepresentation of facts, and conflicts of interest violate the most basic commitment to discover and publish the truth. There are many additional ethical considerations that journalists must consider, some requiring close analysis that does not always yield easy answers. How does one deal with confidential sources and with various forms of background and off-the-record information? Under what circumstances, if any, should a journalist work undercover to collect information? How does a journalist balance newsworthiness against a person’s legitimate right to privacy? We cover these and many other issues in the guide that follows.

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## From Journalism 101: LibreText

### **The Requirements for Success**

In a few weeks, you'll start reporting for this class. You'll write articles and submit them to the Pinnacle. If they meet the requirements, or can be edited to do so, they will be published. In other words, very soon, you won't only be a student learning about journalism—you'll be a journalist, practicing the craft. You won't have any credentials, but interestingly, you don't need any. In this country, you need a license to practice dentistry, or drive a car, or run a beauty salon, but you don't need one to be a newspaper reporter and inflict your version of events on your community.

This is a fascinating setup for journalism, given how much more damage you can do with a newspaper than with a manicure. So even though a real license for this work does not exist, one does ethically. We will spend a lot of time going over the integrity, ethics, and awesome responsibility of being a journalist and publishing information in this world.

### 1. Know *The Post's* Principles

*The Washington Post* is one of the finest newspapers in the nation and the world. For a very long time, it was owned by the Meyer family who, along with the Sulzberger family of *The New York Times*, embodied the highest ideals of American journalism. In a casual interview with Gary Lee, a former Washington Post and New York Times journalist who spent years covering foreign policy, travel, and the environment and is now a freelance journalist. Lee told students that we were learning a noble profession—that a good newspaper is vital to society. He said that the ideal paper contains two types of stories on its front page every day: the lede story,

containing the day's most important news, which every citizen should read, and a "buzz story," containing the day's most interesting, exciting, fascinating, or amusing news, which every citizen would desire to read. To successfully find and report both those stories, he said, the journalists at *The Washington Post* consciously commit, every single day, to the standards of the paper's founder, Eugene Meyer.

Here are Mr. Meyer's principles. He delivered them in a speech on March 5, 1935. They are on a plaque in the newspaper's front lobby; the reporters and editors pass by them several times a day:

- The newspaper shall tell ALL the truth so far as it can learn it, concerning the important affairs of America and the world.
- As a disseminator of news, the paper shall observe the decencies that are obligatory upon a private gentleman.
- What it prints shall be fit reading for the young as well as the old.
- The newspaper's duty is to its readers and to the public at large, and not to the private interests of its owners.
- In the pursuit of truth, the newspaper shall be prepared to make sacrifices of its material fortunes, if such a course be necessary for the public good.
- The newspaper shall not be the ally of any special interest, but shall be fair and free and wholesome in its outlook on public affairs and public men.

Gary Lee and his colleagues at *The Post* take these principles very seriously, and so should you—learn them, abide by them, fight for them, and cherish them.

## 2. Commit to the Truth



The most important of Mr. Meyer’s focused and elegant principles is the first one. His newspaper’s mission is to “tell the truth to the extent that it can be ascertained,” and that should be your mission too.

Newspapers are non-fiction documents. They are a public record of a society’s experiences, and they become, over time, the narrative of a society’s history. Readers of a newspaper trust that it publishes the truth; if what is printed is untrue, that trust has been betrayed. And then of course the power of the press is eroded, and the democracy suffers, for if readers don’t believe what they read, they won’t respond. They won’t act, won’t vote, won’t call their congresspeople to say something should be done about human trafficking. They won’t even believe the human trafficking exists.

So newspapers take great pains to get their stories right. But newspapers are not machines; they are created by humans doing their jobs, so of course there are mistakes and errors in papers all the time. The important point is: the mistakes can’t be deliberate. They can’t be lies, falsifications, distortions, or deceptions. And when the mistakes are discovered, they must be corrected immediately, to set the public record straight.

So if you want to write for a newspaper, you must be committed

right from the start to seeking the truth to the extent that you can find it. And you can't go off pretending to seek the truth, while really you're out to gather a few facts and jot down a few notes and race to the keyboard to write something gorgeous that people will read and swoon over and then ask you out on dates. Because if that's your motivation, you'll probably overwrite in the first place. Far more importantly, you won't have really thought through your story or done the careful work of reporting it thoroughly, and you won't bring the truth home to your editor. You'll bring some approximation of the truth, and then it will need to be reviewed, edited, changed, cut down or added to, and more.

The whole notion of truth can be complicated, as anyone who's ever used the passive voice can attest. (Me: What happened to the lamp? My kids: We were playing soccer and the lamp got broken. Verdict: The kids told "the truth.") And newspaper editors know as well as 10-year-olds do how tricky the idea of truth can be. They know that which stories they cover versus those they ignore, and the sources contacted versus those not called, and the quotes included versus those left out, and the story's tone, and the story's place in the paper, on what page, with what headlines, in what type, with (or without) what photos all affect how well the story reveals the "truth." We'll look at all this in the next chapter. We'll discuss the concepts of "fairness" and "balance" too. Hey, we can get altogether existential if anyone's in the mood.

You might take a moment now to consider these things in some depth, by reading the following links. The first is a September 2012 blog post by Margaret Sullivan in her role as the public editor of *The New York Times*, in which she considers how newspapers should cover political campaigns when the parties and candidates themselves spin the truth. The second leads to special coverage of "Truth in the Age of Social Media" by the Neiman Foundation for Journalism, in which you'll find links to half a dozen superb articles. Finally, step into the shoes of a foreign correspondent in Afghanistan and read this [article](#) to find out what happens when the

press is gutted and there are too few journalists covering certain stories.

But if any of this makes you worry about your ability to be a responsible journalist, then for now just remember that if you are trying earnestly to seek the truth about a story, you will have a good chance of finding it.

In January of 1971, *The Washington Post* received a letter to the editor from a reader who was distressed that the paper had described Helen Keller as “deaf and dumb.” The editors were ashamed that the language had slipped through. I always ask my students why the editors felt this way, and my students wisely point out that Helen Keller was extremely intelligent, while the word “dumb” carries the opposite connotation. And yes, that is so. But here’s the bigger problem: Helen Keller was deaf and blind.

The truth can be complicated but it’s also very simple. If you get your facts right, half the battle’s won.

There is a story by Rabbi Neil Kominsky that will help you remember this. It is the story of a motivational speaker at a CEO convention. The speaker took a big glass beaker and filled it with rocks and asked the audience, “Is this beaker full?”

One of the CEOs raised his hand. “Yes,” he said, “the beaker is full.”

The motivational speaker said, “Wait just a minute.” He then poured gravel into the beaker.

“Is it full now?” he asked.

Getting the picture, the CEOs shook their heads. “No,” they said.

Then he poured in some sand. “Is it full now?”

“No!” they shouted.

Finally, the motivational speaker poured water into the beaker. “Now is it full?”

And the CEOs shouted, “Yes, it is!”

And the motivational speaker said, “Okay! And what’s the lesson we learn from this?”

A CEO raised her hand and said, “The lesson is that when you think you’ve done enough, there’s always more you can do or learn.”

“No,” said the motivational speaker. “The lesson? Put the big rocks in first.”

When you report your stories, put the big rocks in first. Get the facts. No exceptions.

We began this section of the book talking about *The Washington Post* and its list of principles, which have guided journalists at *The Post* for nearly a century. So now you should know that in the summer of 2013, the Graham family sold *The Post* to Jeff Bezos, CEO and founder of Amazon.com. The sale crystallized, in one fell swoop, the revolution sweeping through the American press, as one of the country’s iconic newspaper families sold their storied flagship paper—the paper from the nation’s capital, the paper that broke Watergate—to a dot-com billionaire.

The sale was a shock, no doubt. But most reactions were, surprisingly, positive.

Experts in finance believe Bezos has a long-term plan for making the paper profitable.

And journalists believe that Bezos will cling tight to those principles that you so wisely memorized.



A news ticker on The Washington Post building announcing the

paper's sale to Jeff Bezos on May 8, 2013.

### 3. Dread Mistakes

Your stories will have a big impact on people's lives. This is true of even small or ordinary stories, simply because they're read by so many people. You may not fully understand this until you get blowback for what you wrote or reported.

Here is a story of what happened to an anonymous reporter:

I fully understood this only after I'd turned in my first article for the Winston-Salem Journal in August of 1980. I woke at 3 a.m., panicking. The paper was already on the delivery trucks; what if the story was wrong?

I'd been sent out to cover a drug bust, and not knowing what else to do, I had rung the doorbell of the guy who'd been arrested. Evidently out of jail on bail, he answered the door and then answered my questions. What dumb luck. I came back with a scoop. It was so great.

Then the city editor grilled me on my facts, and the terrifying managing editor (whose glass office we called the Rage Cage) grilled me on my facts, and I answered all of their questions. I was dismissed and congratulated. The story would run on page one.

But now at 3 a.m. I realized: What if the guy who answered the bell wasn't the drug guy after all? What if he was pretending to be the drug guy, but really he was that guy's prankster brother? What if I'd been hoodwinked like crazy, and my editor, unable to imagine I could possibly be that stupid, hadn't caught my mistake?

In that case, I was about to WRONG some innocent man. And, I knew how it felt to be wronged, just as everyone who

has a sibling knows the feeling that comes over you when your sister tells your mother that YOU hit her first, and your mother, incredibly, believes it.

And I knew that if I ever opened a newspaper and read something about myself that was unfair or untrue, I would feel that same shock and fury, that same existential horror that a lie about me was being taken for truth. I didn't want to make anyone else feel that way, ever. I especially didn't want to make someone feel that way 75,000 times, which is how many issues of the Winston-Salem Journal were just then making their way onto the city's lawns.

The next morning, the drug story turned out to be fine. I should have known it would be; I should have trusted the editors. My panic was just the smallest bit irrational. A lunatic brother, ha! Still, that long, grim sleepless night stayed with me, and I took meticulous care never to make mistakes about people in print.

In this field, you must be careful, too. First because you never want to inflict the sort of pain that comes with an unfair characterization in the press. If you've never had it happen to you, you can't really understand how dreadful it is. But try to imagine. Of course you would never, ever deliberately mischaracterize someone in print (that would be cowardly, after all—better to have the guts to hit that person over the head with a rock), but you must take care that you don't do it accidentally, either.

Secondly, you must dread mistakes because they might make you timid. There's a saying: "A scalded cat fears even cold water." When you make mistakes, you get scalded. You feel bad, of course; plus you may get screamed at by an editor, or sued. You will wish your story could be unpublished, your words unread. But they can't be, and all the corrections in the world can't un-muddy the waters that you've muddied. So after you make a mistake in print, you will feel timid for a while, worrying that you might screw up again.

You can't be timid. You must be courageous. As a journalist, you

act on behalf of the people in your community. You're not you; you're "the people"—just the one of them who happens to have the little notebook. You are a watchdog against abuses of power, and you are the chronicler of your community's truth. You cannot be afraid to dig around and bring the truth to light, even when it's unpleasant. So don't get scalded by making mistakes, because then you might lose your courage on stories you've got right.

If you aim to become skilled reporter, maybe with special knowledge in one focused area, and if you know *The Post's* principles, commit to the truth, and dread mistakes, you will have the skills and motivation to produce splendid work. Of course no one is perfect—you'll screw up. But your editors will have your back.

## 2. Chapter 2: Why Study Journalism?

Adapted from Librtext: [Journalism 101](#)

*“Life only demands from the strength you possess. Only one feat is possible—not to have run away.”*



– Dag Hammarskjöld

So why *do* you want to study journalism? Think about why you want to study journalism, and why you want to learn how to report and write for a newspaper. First, think about why good journalism matters in the world. It does, very much. There were two huge moments in American history that inspired a generation of journalists: the Pentagon Papers and then Watergate.

The [Pentagon Papers](#), in case you don't know, was a top-secret study of the Vietnam War commissioned by the U.S. Secretary of Defense in 1967, while the war was still raging. The study described extensive illegal military maneuvers the American people knew nothing about, including American bombing of Laos and Cambodia, sovereign nations that were not even in the war.

## DISSIDENT ACTIVITIES IN INDOCHINA

(3 November 1950)

-  Areas in which Communist-led rebels are challenging government authority.
-  Areas in which Communist-instigated guerrilla attacks have recently occurred.



A map created by the CIA that was published as part of the Pentagon Papers.

In 1971, the study was leaked to *The New York Times* by a man named [Daniel Ellsberg](#), and then *The Times*'s editors had a crucial decision to make: Should they publish a top-secret classified document? If they did, the government might censor the paper on the grounds of national security and might prosecute Ellsberg

for treason. Many lawyers argued the paper should not publish; the editors, however, and the paper's lawyers, believed the [First Amendment](#) gave the newspaper the right to tell the American people what their government was doing. They also believed the study would not aid the enemy or jeopardize national security, and so they began publishing excerpts. The [government sued](#) to stop the publication, but the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the suit unconstitutional. Ellsberg turned himself in as the source of the leak and was charged with treason, but the charges were dismissed. Publication of the Pentagon Papers led to protests in the streets and, in time, changed the course of the war.

As for [Watergate](#), this was the name of a secret illegal political operation run by President Richard Nixon and his staff. *The Washington Post* uncovered it little by little in the course of a superb investigation undertaken by two very young, very dogged reporters who were supported by their editors and by *The Post's* publisher, Katharine Graham, who did not back down when the Nixon administration threatened to cripple her paper financially. *The Post's* Watergate stories led the Justice Department to indict and convict several of the president's advisors and led to President's Nixon's impeachment and resignation in 1974.



Demonstrators in Washington, D.C. demanding Nixon's impeachment in October 1973, as evidence mounted against the president and his staff in the Watergate case.

These two stories are iconic—they represent the pinnacle of a free

press acting as the watchdog for its society—but every day, in stories published all around you, citizens are served and protected by this country’s free press. Think, for example, about [CNN’s coverage](#) of Hurricane Katrina and what a difference it made that the press was on the scene when the catastrophe unfolded. Or go to the [website](#) of *The New Orleans Times-Picayune* and read how the paper covered that storm’s aftermath, literally for years. Or read today’s *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, or *New York Times*, and consider what it means that the world KNOWS the stories they published.

Let’s consider one story in particular, which was published in *The New York Times* on October 29, 2006. Written by correspondent Sharon LaFraniere, the story, “[Africa’s World of Forced Labor, in a 6-Year-Old’s Eyes](#),” tells the tale of children in Ghana who work as slaves on fishing boats. They shiver through miserable hours of labor, flinch beneath beatings, and collapse at night onto dirt floors, where they sleep wearing the rags they work in. Some of these children are as young as six. Their parents leased them as indentured servants, and they are among 1.2 million children trafficked as slaves in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. You should read the story all the way through and then ask yourself these questions: Who cares that this information has been unearthed by a reporter and published? Who wishes the information had not been exposed? What difference does it make that the world has been told?

Then read a story on page A-3 of your favorite newspaper—or page 7 or 17, it doesn’t matter—and select a story that is fairly short, that you can read in a couple of minutes. Now ask yourself the same questions: Who cares that this is in the paper? Why does it matter that readers are aware of it? You’ll probably see that Ms. LaFraniere’s story is a big story, a critical story, really, for the world to know, since it exposes a ghastly crime, and you’re likely to see that your page A-3 story is a smaller story but still important, still a record of some true thing that has just happened in real time, something that deserves to be exposed to the light of day, to the gaze of the people.

I'm sure both the large and smaller stories gave you information you hadn't otherwise known, and I imagine Ms. LaFraniere's story also made you *feel* something—for instance, that someone should really STOP THAT SLAVERY FOR CRYING OUT LOUD! And your passion would be priceless—your passion would justify every claim I could ever make about the role of journalism in society, its crucial importance to the world. Unfortunately, your passion about the children in Ghana doesn't automatically translate into action on anybody's part—even, at the moment, on yours, because you are a student after all, not a diplomat or a warrior—and those with responsibility for stopping the enslavement of children in Africa might have no response to Ms. LaFraniere's story.

This can be hideously depressing, but it illustrates an important point, which is that a journalist's power is limited to seeking out the truth and reporting it. After that, it's up to the readers—that is, it's up to the citizens—to respond. It is up to the citizens to change things if they have the power to do so, or to urge those in power to change things, or, if they live in democracies, to demand it. And we'll consider all of that in a moment.

For now, though, let's get back to Ms. LaFraniere. It seems possible that she risked her life to get that story, and, indeed, all over the world, journalists risk their lives for stories all the time. Here's a recent roundup, in a press release from the International News Safety Institute (INSI):

***Arab Spring fuels bleak winter for news media in 2012***[\[1\]](#)

8 Aug 2012

LONDON – At least 70 journalists and support staff were killed covering the news in the first half of this year in one of the bloodiest periods of recent times.

Fifteen were confirmed dead in Syria alone between January and June, according to the biannual *Killing The Messenger* survey of news media casualties carried out for INSI by Cardiff School of Journalism.

The next worst countries were Nigeria, where seven unidentified newspaper staff were killed by a bomb, Brazil, Somalia, Indonesia, where five journalists died in a plane crash, and Mexico.

The toll compares with 124 for the whole of 2011 and 56 for the first seven months of last year. And 70 may be a conservative figure as INSI has recorded the deaths of an additional 30 news people where it was unclear whether the killings were related to their work.

INSI invites anyone with more information on any of those unexplained deaths to make contact.

“Journalists are more than ever in the cross-hairs of the enemies of freedom,” said INSI Director Rodney Pinder.

“Despite some encouraging international political moves to halt the murder, the gun and the bomb remain the favoured method of censorship in far too many countries.

“Each and every killing chokes the free flow of information without which free societies cannot function.”

The survey highlighted again that despite the Syrian conflagration the great majority of news media deaths around the world are in peacetime. Forty-three journalists died in countries officially at peace, victims mostly of vicious criminals, often abetted by corrupt security forces, politicians and business interests.

Most of the dead were shot or bombed, but some suffered appalling ends – beaten, tortured, strangled, stabbed or decapitated.

The third biggest cause of death was road accidents, every year a particularly wasteful loss.

Scandalously, most of the killers of journalists continue to get away with it. In the first half of this year only one person was identified in connection with 47 targeted killings worldwide.

The rate of impunity for murder of a journalists [sic] has remained constant at around 90 per cent globally for the past 10 years – undoubtedly fuelling more of the same.

As a safety organisation, INSI records all deaths of journalists and other news workers in the course of their duties, whether deliberate or accidental.

After reading this press release, you are probably clutching your little face with an [Edvard Munch scream](#), thinking, No, no, no; this journalism class is too depressing. There’s still time to switch courses. I’m out of here.

But the bottom line here is just the opposite of depressing. The bottom line here is not that humans steal children or run thieving corporations and corrupt governments or seize power with grotesque brutality and then behead the journalists who expose them. The bottom line here is that yes, humans do all these things, but journalists keep telling their stories.

And as long as journalists tell the stories, criminals—even criminal gangs and governments—cannot hide their crimes.

So now it must be dawning on you that to live in a country where the press is not censored or intimidated (or hunted down and shot through the head), and where, in fact, the people’s freedom of speech is protected by the judicial branch of the government, is to enjoy a crucial liberty. So you can stand on the street corner holding a peace flag, and the police can’t run you off—or you can write a story about the peace flags for a newspaper, and the police can’t shut that paper down. And the newspaper can cover stories not only about peace flags, but also about slavery in Africa and corruption and lies in the White House.

#### World Press Freedom

A map displaying results of the 2020 Press Freedom Index, an annual assessment of press freedom in countries around the world conducted by the Reporters Without Borders organization. See a more interactive map on the [Reporters Without Borders Website](#).

This, of course, is why America’s founding fathers wrote the first amendment to their constitution: “Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.” The founders wanted their government not to repress its people but to govern with their consent, and a free press was their insurance policy.

Interestingly, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, such a free press was as radical an idea as the concept of democracy it was designed to protect. It had first been expounded by two London journalists, who wrote an [article in 1721](#) under the pen name “Cato.” At the time in Britain, it was a crime to criticize the royal government, and, the more true the criticism, the more severe the penalty for publishing it. In other

words, you were guilty of libel if you wrote the truth. Cato argued that the exact opposite should be true—that you could not be guilty of libel if you wrote the truth, and this idea took root in the colonies among revolutionary journalists, including Benjamin Franklin, who published Cato’s writings.<sup>[2]</sup>

The concept of a free press was born in America along with the country itself; though, just how free that press could truly be was not established right away. Indeed, the same men who wrote the First Amendment soon passed the [Sedition Act of 1798](#). Designed to protect the infant nation under threat of war from France, the act prohibited publication of any “false, scandalous, or malicious writing” about the government, and under the act, two dozen men were arrested and their papers shut down. But when he became president, Thomas Jefferson declared the act unconstitutional, and it expired in 1801. In the two hundred years since then, the nation’s courts have ruled again and again in favor of journalists’ right to publish the truth, until gradually “the notion of a free press as a bulwark of liberty became embedded in American legal doctrine.”<sup>[3]</sup>



A painting depicting the signing of the Constitution of the United States.

“No other nation gives its journalists so much constitutional

protection, and as a result, so much responsibility,” write veteran journalists Leonard Downie and Robert Kaiser in their book, [\*The News About the News\*](#).

We will spend plenty of time examining what it means to be a responsible journalist. In my opinion, that is the only type of journalist one can be. If a person isn’t responsible at the work, she isn’t really a journalist; she’s just pretending to be a journalist while she wallows in the glory of her byline and believes, in her secret heart, that what’s most important about her article is not the story at all, but the fact that SHE wrote it. And, the truth is, some journalists do work this way, but they are never the very best ones, as you will be, for they never really internalize what it means to defend the democracy with their personal resources, namely their energy and skill, their judgment, intellect, and courage.

For now, though, let’s put all that away—we’ll get back to it in later chapters. I want you to switch gears and stop thinking about your responsibilities as a future journalist. Instead—and this is the second thing I wanted you to consider—think about your responsibilities as a citizen.

If you are from a democratic country—America or otherwise—you have not only the right of free speech, but also the right to do something about the information you receive. So think about it. When a journalist’s story is published, she rubs the back of her neck (she’s been at that keyboard for weeks), sticks all her notes in a file drawer, crosses her fingers, and lets the chips fall where they may. She cares about her story—of course she cares about it deeply—but her job is over. Now it belongs to the people to do with it what they will. If they even read it.

And that is you—the people. If you take advantage of a democracy’s gifts—your freedom to receive uncensored information, to begin with, and then, right up there on my personal all-time hit-list of privileges, your right to hold your government accountable with your voice and your vote—then I wonder if you feel you have any responsibilities in return? You are required to read the newspaper every day for this course, obviously, but forget about the

course for the moment. Just as a citizen, do you have a responsibility to stay informed, to read the news that journalists have dug up on your behalf—even the boring news? Why or why not?

If you read the news, do you have any obligation to respond to it? And if so, what exactly would that obligation be? So naturally I believe you should make time in your day to read the stories that journalists have reported, verified, and written up on your behalf—make the time to think about these stories, to live up to your end of the democracy by holding your elected officials accountable with your vote (or at least to do that when you turn 18). Indeed, I believe these things should be habits, and you should feel just the tiniest bit superior to people who don't have these commitments—and you should never, ever date them! Not that it's my business...

But I'm sure you already know all this and are one step ahead of me, thinking, “Well, what if I *do* read important stories and stay informed and go to the polls and vote, and then I *still* don't really have an impact on things, like the child slavery in Africa.”

And I say: Nevertheless, it is crucially important that you know the slavery exists. Knowledge is a light that shines into dark places. Your carrying the knowledge in your head (and heart) matters, even if, right now, you cannot know exactly what it means or what to do with it. And in situations closer to home—in the continuing saga in New Orleans (post-Hurricane Katrina), for example, or in whatever event was described on page A-3 of your favorite paper—your being informed is crucially important indeed. Your fellow citizens are reading the papers, too; together, you are the Fourth Estate, the people, the court of last resort, and a power that can change the world. But don't take my word for it. Think it through for yourself.

#### Exercises

1. Take the front page (print copy) of a national newspaper. Pretend you are a dictator who controls the press. What stories from the front page would you censor and why? Cut them out. Discuss what the citizens are left with for their

news, and what the citizens have lost.

2. Select a story from your local newspaper (print or digital edition). Make a list of people who you think will—or should—care about this story, and explain why they should.
3. In your own words, explain how a free press protects a society's other freedoms.

[1] [www.newssafety.org/news.php?news=20542&cat=press-room-news-release](http://www.newssafety.org/news.php?news=20542&cat=press-room-news-release)

[2] Kovach, Bill and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 22.

[3] Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*, 23.

[4] <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0CE6DE133FF936A35751C0A9619C8B63>

# 3. Chapter 3: Ethics and the Law

## [From Journalism 101: Libertext](#)

### Introduction

*“Everyone is a prisoner of his own experiences. No one can eliminate prejudices—just recognize them.”*

– [Edward R. Murrow](#)

Let’s say you hear a rumor that the cops came to your English teacher’s house Saturday night when her friends were dancing to Bruce Springsteen’s “Rosalita” and shouting “Huh! Huh! Huh!” along with Bruce and Clarence and Bruce’s totally hip wife Patty. These faculty members were rocking out. It was embarrassing, according to the kids in the dorm next door. So you go to the police station and sure enough there’s an arrest record. Smart reporter that you are, you bring the document straight home to the newsroom. But how exactly should it be published? It might be a hoot to tell the world your English teacher had disturbed the peace by dancing badly to Springsteen, especially if the story was short with a cute first paragraph (heh, heh), but what if the story ran under the (accurate) headline: “English Teacher Arrested”? That would be truthful. Would it be fair?

And here we slide into those philosophical issues we skated through in early sections of this book. Your editors from hell are accustomed to such questions. It is their job to assign newsworthy stories, place them under headlines that do them justice, position them in places that reflect their importance, and kill them—or “spike them” in newspaper lingo—when they don’t merit publishing.

Most young reporters are surprised to learn how often editors spike stories; most readers have absolutely no idea. But keeping unworthy stories out of the paper is exactly as important as getting worthy stories in.

Obviously, the *most* important stories to keep OUT of the paper are those that break the laws of libel. You can learn some basic information about those laws in the next section of this book.

The stories that get IN must be accurate, as you know (ad nauseum by now), and, what's more, they should be ethical. That is, in every way, they should be fair.

How do you make a story “fair”? That's a great question, and it's not easy to answer. Ethical stories are complete, unbiased, and balanced. But these are complex requirements. If a scientist argues that global warming exists, for example, is it “balanced” to give equal space in the article to an industry executive, also a scientist, arguing the threat is overstated? Most journalists and scholars of ethical journalism would say no. If a formal conference is held among Holocaust deniers (as it was, in 2007, in Iran), is it “fair” to cover the conference? To report the speakers' remarks? Does a paper covering such speeches inadvertently endorse them? Or help disseminate them? Should the paper find historians to give a “balanced” view? How do you “balance” fabrications with historical fact? What, in this circumstance, is actually “fair”?

These questions are so vexing even veteran journalists would be reading these questions through their fingers. Attempting to make the above stories “fair” can do more harm than good, if this means turning to sources who are themselves unethical, compromised, or biased. The term “balanced” isn't ideal either, since so often a story has only one intelligible side, or has far more than two. And while journalists must seek truth and report it, they must also minimize the harm that may come from their stories. This is especially important when covering what journalism professor Jay Rosen calls “[wicked problems](#)”—stories about problems so complex they can barely be described, much less solved. Furthermore, we are all human and therefore subject to our own skewed perceptions even

when we're journalists. And it's not only wicked problems that are hard to cover. Ordinary, everyday stories pose all sorts of ethical dilemmas, too. How do you cover a story about a friend? When should you write up a story that is underway, when the publicity will alter its course? If a story might do harm as well as good, what is the obligation to run it? Difficult questions. So how do you answer them?

Andrew Gully from the *Boston Herald*, has a little mantra he always told his reporters: "Be true to the story." That is, you shouldn't pledge that you'll be true to yourself when you report and write a story, nor that you'll be true to your sources, nor to your readers. Instead, the story itself has a life of its own. If you think about staying true to the story, you'll be off to a good start.

After that, study the journalists' code of ethics, the five principles for reporting and writing, and the basics of libel law. You will find them in this chapter of the book.

## Ethics

### Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics

Professional journalists follow the [Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics](#). These are the rules under which ethical journalists operate as they go about their work, and the code is the foundation on which ethical journalism rests. The rules belong to four categories: Seek Truth and Report It; Minimize Harm; Act Independently; and Be Accountable.

You should read the code through several times. Some of the rules won't seem relevant to you at first, because you won't have encountered that particular ethical dilemma or challenging situation. But the more you report, write, and edit stories, the more you'll run into situations in which *you will need to know the code*. The

code’s language—appropriate for journalists—is concise and clear. You shouldn’t skim the list of rules; instead, think about each one, and why it matters, and how you would fulfill it. You will learn so much about ethical journalism—quickly!

### *Ethics Case Studies*

Take a walk now in the shoes of experienced journalists confronting those difficult ethical dilemmas. Here’s a link to some of the Society of Professional Journalists’ recent [ethics case studies](#), in which elements of the ethics code are examined. You should try your hand at figuring out what you would do under these circumstances. (Be sure to read about each case’s background and outcome.) I find the case “When Sources Won’t Talk” particularly interesting, as it’s about a college newspaper. (Note the difference between the fraternity’s “apology” and the one offered by the sorority. And note the care with which the college newspaper’s editors tracked down what actually happened and made their decisions, given that the college paper itself was involved, tangentially, in the story.)

The Indiana University School of Journalism also has a superb collection of ethics cases, including one titled, “White Lies: Bending the Truth to Expose Injustice.” (The cases are based on the work of the late Barry Bingham, Jr., who was the editor and publisher of *The Courier-Journal* and *The Louisville Times*.)

### *The Five Principles for Reporting and Writing*

In 2006, veteran journalists Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel queried 1,200 editors and reporters as part of a three-year project on the state of journalism in America. They were looking to see which principles were identified most often as guiding reporters and editors in their day-to-day work. let these principles guide you:

## 1. Never add anything that wasn't there.

If a person wears a neon necktie one day and clown shoes the next, you cannot describe him as if he's wearing both those things at once. You'll want to, to make the story better, but you can't mess with reality this way, on clown shoes or anything else. Do not add.

## 2. Never deceive the audience.

Don't change quotes without ellipses or brackets, even to fix grammar. Don't make it appear that you heard something when it was said if you only found out about it later; don't make it appear as if someone said something to you in an interview if they said it in a speech. Don't photoshop pictures; don't give the readers any approximation of the truth. Do not confuse or obfuscate; do not deceive.

## 3. Be as transparent as possible about your own methods and motives.

The reader should understand where, when, and how you got the information for your story, and should understand your motives for ordering the information as you did. Do not work with secrets.

## 4. Rely on your own original reporting.

Check out what others tell you, including what is reported in other media. In the end, it's *your* story.



Beware of relying too much on a press release or other sources of secondhand reporting.

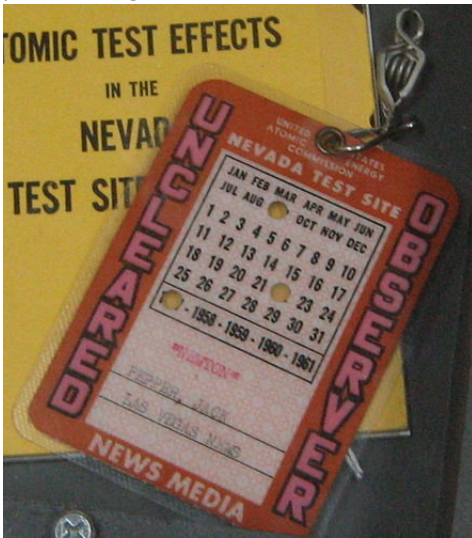
## 5. Exercise humility.

Be skeptical about your own ability to understand a story fully. Of course you must talk to the stakeholders in any story so you hear their point of view. Beyond that, though, you should question yourself: Are you sure you know what a fundamentalist means when he talks about being saved? Are you sure you understand why a school committee member would be opposed to health education? Maybe you don't know all the background. Maybe you don't know all the details. Educate yourself.

## Wearing the Press Pass

Let's face it—wearing a press pass is a blast. You don't actually need one to work as a journalist, but you might receive one from your school, or you can [apply for one](#) if you're a freelance journalist or

photographer. When you throw that thing around your neck, frankly you feel special—and I think you should! The press pass proclaims to the world that you're not just a spectator at this scene but a person on a mission; you're at work. Your senses are heightened, your thoughts are focused, your mind is alert, and you know what you're doing.



A 1957 press pass for a journalist from the Las Vegas News Bureau to the U.S. Department of Energy's Nevada Test Site.

Except that if you're at all like me, you *don't* know what you're doing the first few times—or even the first dozen times—you go out on a story. You're a bit shy or a bit confused, and you don't know where you're supposed or allowed to be. Not to worry; you'll learn the ropes. But what you must know from the start are the rules of conduct for wearing that press pass. These rules apply whether you're wearing a physical press pass or not—if you're working on a story, these rules apply. They were written by [Melissa Wantz](#) of Foothill Technology High School, one of the country's most fabulous journalism teachers and a former journalist herself, whose students adore her because she is smart and funny and quick, and because she's tough and demanding. You can see her personality right here

on the page in her rules for press pass use for her student journalists at [The Foothill Dragon Press](#).

## Ethics for Press Pass Use by Melissa Wantz<sup>[1]</sup>

- If you are using a press credential, your behavior is impeccable.
  - You show up when you're supposed to and only work in the area(s) assigned to you.
  - Your friends (or family) can't come along and you can't hang out with them if they "happen" to be there. You're working.
  - You are always mindful of your personal space, the space of others, your tone of voice, and your demeanor. (Texting and cell phone use is generally frowned upon.)
  - You may not wear campaign buttons, team insignias, or anything else that could show that you may have a bias.
- There's no free lunch.
  - You cannot go into restaurants and tell them they're being reviewed. (Ergo, you cannot ever ask for or expect free food.) Take friends (preferably staffers) and order several items, quietly talk about them, and take notes. Only ask the server the type of questions a normal patron would ask. Go back again for a second review if you didn't like the food or service—it may have been an off-day and no business deserves to have its reputation tarnished for one off-night.
  - You may not collect "freebies" from an event. (Consider your press pass your "souvenir.")
- If you cover it, then you will write/publish a photo essay/produce a video about it.
  - Receiving press passes are a privilege, not a right. They are given for publicity purposes (even if you have to fairly

report the play is awful). You need to provide the publicity you promised by attending the event as a member of the press.

- If you have a breach in ethics or otherwise break the staff's trust, then you will no longer be able to use [the school's] publication's name to obtain press passes. Our reputation is on the line, too.

## Exercises

1. An activity for the classroom from Melissa Wantz:
  1. Print out a copy of the NSPA's Model Code of Ethics for each student.
  2. Break the class into seven groups, one for each ethic.
  3. Have each group read their section together, discuss the most important ideas, and come up with a skit to demonstrate clearly what not to do and/or what to do.
  4. Have each group perform their short skit for the class the next day, and the class can talk and brainstorm based on what was presented in the skits. Students or the teacher may challenge the performers, asking, "How else could the reporter have handled this situation?" or "Why wouldn't we do this?" if appropriate.
  5. When the skits are over, have students return to their groups and condense their section into no more than 15 words. Then have them write their 15-word sentences on the board. Those seven 15-word sentences become the class's own condensed code of ethics.
2. For students studying on their own, explore more of the [ethics case studies](#) compiled by the Society of Professional Journalists and try your hand at wrestling with some of the difficult scenarios presented.
3. Explore more of the Indiana University School of Journalism's collection of [ethics case studies](#). Select some cases that interest you and consider how they were handled. Would you

have made the same decisions?

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## The Law

*“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”*

– The [First Amendment](#) to the Constitution of the United States

The First Amendment to the Constitution protects American citizens’ right to free speech and to a free press, but the Amendment does not protect the people’s right to say—or print—whatever they want. On the contrary, certain types of speech are illegal. You can’t scream, “Fire!” in a crowded movie theater that’s not actually on fire, for example, because your lie risks harming people. Similarly, you can’t publish information about another person that is untrue and damaging to her; this is called libel, and it’s against the law. Neither can you print material that invades someone’s privacy or material that is obscene; these types of expression are illegal, and if you print them, you risk being sued.

Now you are probably thinking, “Oh, for goodness sake, no one is going to sue *me*! I’m 18 years old, I hardly know what I’m doing as a journalist, I’ve got editors in charge of my stories, and this is altogether *not* my responsibility. Plus, some other entity publishes the stories—a school, or a non-profit corporation—so why would anyone bother suing me? I have ten bucks in my wallet, and I’m about to spend five of them on a latte.”

All of that is true, but make no mistake: If your byline is on a story containing illegal expression, you may be included in any libel lawsuit pertaining to that story. If you’re named in the suit, you’ll

have to hire a lawyer, and those guys cost money—plenty of it—even if the case never goes to court.

On the other hand, it is true that you could write libelous material and never be sued. People harmed by libel often don't want to put themselves through the draining experience and expense of a lawsuit that only brings on more publicity, and they may be sympathetic to your position as a novice journalist and a student.

And even if you are sued for libel, you might not be found guilty, because it is not simple for a plaintiff to meet all the standards for a successful case.

Nonetheless, if you break the laws of libel, you will indeed risk provoking an expensive lawsuit, not to mention harming your newspaper's reputation and your own. Worst of all, you'll have harmed someone in a most serious way, or, in the case of obscenity, harmed your community.

Thus, it's important that you have at least a basic understanding of the law of libel, invasion of privacy, and obscenity. The brief descriptions below will give you a very general outline of the law. Far more thorough lessons are available from the [Student Press Law Center](#) (SPLC), a non-profit organization that educates student journalists about their legal rights. Please make sure to read the SPLC resources linked below in each section.

## Libel

**Libel** is a false printed statement of fact that attacks a person's reputation or good name and tends to harm her reputation in the community. (Libel is based on the printed word; **slander** is based on the spoken word.) A negative, inaccurate story about someone would be considered libelous:

1. If the story were published (rather than, for example, contained in a letter).

2. If the person libeled could be identified in the story (either by name, or, if the person is not named, if a small group of readers could nonetheless figure out who he is).
3. If the person libeled then suffered damage to his reputation or diminished standing in the community.
4. If the reporter who wrote the story didn't verify the story's accuracy. A private person suing for libel can win his case simply by showing that a reporter didn't adequately verify information; a public person on the other hand (such as a celebrity, or someone who has a public role in the community) must also show that the reporter had reason to suspect the information might be false but published it anyway.

Now, please read this [legal brief](#) from the SPLC on libel law.

Note: If the reporter wrote the false and damaging statements only as a joke, or preceded them with "In my opinion..." the false and damaging remarks are STILL LIBEL, and the reporter can be sued. That's not so funny, but it's true.

Also note: If a source provides untrue and damaging information to you and you publish it, you are the one who can be sued. That's because your source merely *spoke* to you, one individual, while you *published* the libelous remark and therefore made it available for many people to read, which is what makes it damaging. So be sure you completely trust your source, or else be sure to double check the facts contained in your source's quotes, even quotes that are "on the record." If the quote is not true, it's your neck, not your source's, on the line.

Finally, remember this—the absolute defense against libel is simple: Publish only the truth.

# How Libel Holds Up in Court: From Middle Tennessee State University's First Amendment Encyclopedia

## Actual Malice

By Stephen Wermiel

Actual malice is the legal standard established by the Supreme Court for [libel](#) cases to determine when [public officials or public figures](#) may recover damages in lawsuits against the news media.

The standard came from the case *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* (1964) involving this advertisement alleging abuses by the Montgomery police. (The New York Times advertisement that prompted a libel lawsuit by a city commissioner in Montgomery County who oversaw police, via National Archives, public domain)

## **Public officials cannot win libel cases without proof of actual malice**

Beginning with the unanimous decision in [New York](#)

[Times Co. v. Sullivan](#) (1964), the Supreme Court has held that public officials cannot recover damages for libel without proving that a statement was made with actual malice – defined as “with knowledge that it was [false](#) or with reckless disregard of whether it was false or not.”

The decision in Sullivan threw out a damage award against the New York Times, but only six of the nine justices fully agreed with Justice [William J. Brennan Jr.](#)'s use of the actual malice standard, which he derived from a Kansas Supreme Court ruling, [Coleman v. MacLennan \(Kan. 1908\)](#). Justices [Hugo L. Black](#) and [Arthur J. Goldberg](#), joined by [Justice William O. Douglas](#), thought the Court should go farther to protect criticism of public officials and debate about public affairs.

## Public figures, officials bear burden of proving actual malice

In subsequent cases, the Supreme Court elaborated on the actual malice test in the libel context. In [St. Amant v. Thompson](#) (1968), the Court recognized the standard as a subjective one, requiring proof that the defendant actually had doubts about the truth or falsity of a story. It extended the application of the actual malice test to public figures, not just public officials, in [Curtis Publishing Co. v. Butts](#) (1967).

Under the actual malice standard, if the individual who sues is a [public official or public figure](#), that individual bears the burden of proving that the media defendant acted with actual malice. The amount of proof must be “clear and

convincing evidence,” and the standard applies to compensatory as well as to punitive damages.

## Actual malice not required for private figures

Concerning private figures, however, the Court ruled in [Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc.](#) (1974) that actual malice is not required for recovery of compensatory damages, but is the standard for punitive damages.

## Court has used actual malice test to give news First Amendment protection

The Supreme Court has expanded the reach of the First Amendment to afford the news media protection against other types of lawsuits designed to protect individual privacy, including those alleging intentional infliction of emotional distress, as in [Hustler Magazine v. Falwell](#) (1988); disclosure of private facts, as per [Florida Star v. B.J.F.](#) (1989); and depicting someone in a [false light](#), as in [Time Inc. v. Hill](#) (1967). In all of these cases, the Court applied the same actual malice test to further recognize the principle of free and open comment in a democratic society.

The actual malice standard has at times drawn criticism from people in the public eye who think the test makes it too hard for them to restore their reputations and from the

news media, which has complained that the standard does not afford enough protection for freedom of speech.

In July 2021, justices Clarence Thomas and Neil Gorsuch wrote separate dissenting opinions to a denial of certiorari in the defamation case [Berisha v. Lawson](#), saying that the actual malice standard needed review. Gorsuch argued that the media landscape had changed dramatically since the *New York Times* decision.

*This article was originally published in 2009 and has been updated by encyclopedia staff as recently as July 2021.*

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## Invasion of Privacy

It is against the law to invade someone's privacy, and you can break that law in one of four ways:

### Intrusion

- If you enter someone's private place (a home, office, restroom,

locker room, or other private area) without that person's consent, or photograph someone in a private place without that person's consent.

- If you quote or tape-record someone without that person's consent.
- If you reprint material without the author's permission.
- If you quote inaccuracies from a third party (that is, if you quote person A telling you what person B said, thought, felt, or did without person B verifying that it's true.)

## Misappropriation

- If you use someone's name or photograph for commercial purposes without that person's consent.

## False Light

- If you offer true information in a way that implies something false.

## Private or Embarrassing Information

- If you publish private information. Medical records, sexual history, and school reports by their nature are private and privileged, and you cannot publish them. There are some exceptions, however. You may publish such information if it is considered "newsworthy"—for example, if you publish it in a story about a crime. You may publish private information if the person you're writing about gives you permission, or **consent**.

And some public officials and “public figures” are not protected by the privacy law.

Now, please read this [legal brief](#) from the SPLC on invasion of privacy law.

## Obscenity

**Obscenity** is defined as “something that by community standards arouses sexual desire, depicts sexual conduct in a patently offensive way, and lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.” Profanity is not the same thing as obscenity, so while you do not want profanity in your stories—it’s almost always either tacky or offensive—you aren’t breaking the law if you publish it. Obscenity, though, is indeed illegal.

I honestly think it’s not that easy to write something obscene. I mean, look at the definition! You’d have to really work hard at it, keep your focus, and plow through the obscene descriptions. Chances are you’d become mortified with embarrassment and delete yourself right out of harm’s way. If, however, you are writing a humor column late at night, especially if you’re giddy with exhaustion, *step away from the computer.*

More about the Legal Issues in  
Journalism (from [NYU Journalism  
Handbook for Students](#))

**BREAKING THE LAW IN PURSUIT OF A STORY**

Journalists are subject to the same laws as any other citizens, and the newsworthiness of a story is no defense against a criminal charge. For example, journalists have been prosecuted for such offenses as criminal trespass; disorderly conduct for refusing to follow the instructions of a police officer; theft of trade secrets; theft by hacking into computer, voicemail and email systems; and possession of child pornography.

Even when reporters don't violate a criminal statute, they may still cause a personal injury that can lead to a civil lawsuit for money damages. Examples include defamation; invasion of privacy through physical or electronic intrusion into a person's physical space; invasion of privacy through the publication of embarrassing private facts; intentional infliction of emotional distress; misrepresentation or fraud; breach of contract; and tortious interference with contract (interfering with a source's confidentiality agreement with their employer). It should be noted that while a great deal of consideration should be given to whether it is appropriate to disclose a source's medical condition, journalists are not "covered entities" under HIPAA – the

Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act – and cannot be criminally prosecuted for such breaches.

**SUNSHINE LAWS AND THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT (FOIA)**

First implemented in the 1970s, Sunshine Laws seek to shine light on the inner workings of state and federal government officials and departments. As a result most meetings of regulatory bodies must be public and their decisions and records disclosed. These laws are not limited to the United States. Some 70 nations have implemented sunshine laws of varying strengths.

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), enacted in 1966, requires that government agencies disclose records not specifically and reasonably exempt to any individuals—including journalists—upon written request, with the right of access enforceable in court. FOIA applies to more than 70 executive branch agencies in the federal government (Environmental Protection Agency, for example) and 15 departments (including the Department of Justice). The president, Congress and the courts are not covered by the law, nor are state governments (although each state has passed its own freedom-of-information legislation, as have a number of cities and municipalities). FOIA does not apply to state or local government agencies records, nor can a reporter FOIA a company or individual.

For the patient reporter—it can take months for a government agency to fulfill a FOIA request—they can provide valuable information. For example, in 2005 the Associated Press learned through a FOIA request that

National Institutes of Health scientists received “millions of dollars in royalties for experimental treatments without having to tell patients testing the treatments that the researchers’ had a financial connection.” *The New York Daily News* used a FOIA to find out that the federal courthouse in lower Manhattan incurred maintenance and cleaning costs that were twice what state court buildings paid, including a bill for \$84,812 to polish the brass located in the building entrances. Blogger Jeff Jarvis filed a FOIA to discover that the Federal Communications Commission claim it received 159 complaints from people about a sexually suggestive TV show—which led to a record \$1.2 million against Fox in 2004—was brought about by three people who actually wrote the letters to the FCC. (The rest were photocopies.)

The Society of Professional Journalists provides a handy [“toolkit”](#) covering FOIAs, including how to apply state and federal governmental, and law enforcement records. And The First Amendment Center also offers useful [information](#) on FOIAs, as does [MuckRock](#).

### **GOVERNMENT SUBPOENAS**

Reporters have only limited protection if they are served with a subpoena to testify or to produce notes and other documents. Protection varies under the circumstances.

*Grand jury proceedings:* Reporters called to testify before a federal grand jury have no First Amendment protection if they refuse to testify. Refusal to testify can

result in a criminal contempt of court citation and a prison term of days to months or longer.

*Criminal and civil trials:* Most courts recognize qualified First Amendment protection when reporters are called to testify at trials. Courts consider whether the reporter has information that goes to the heart of the case and whether the information can be obtained from sources other than the reporter. The result, generally speaking, is that reporters must often testify at criminal trials, where the public interest in testifying is very high, but often successfully challenge a subpoena to testify at a civil trial.

Many states have what are known as “shield laws” that provide some protection to journalists called to testify. But these laws are typically porous and often don’t provide adequate protection in an individual case. There is no federal shield law that would protect reporters from being called to testify in federal court proceedings (as opposed to state court proceedings). The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press has compiled a [detailed list](#) of state shield laws.

## Copyright

Individuals in America have a right to their intellectual property—not only work they’ve published but also work they’ve created that has not been published. Thus, you may not reprint someone else’s intellectual work—their poem, story, picture, photo, graphic, lyric, music, play, cartoon, board game, or any other sort

of created work—without their permission. If you do so, you may be sued and fined. Please also refer to the SPLC’s Student Media Guide to Copyright Law.

## Public Domain

A great deal of material published on the Internet is, indeed, available to be reprinted in your newspaper that are not eligible for copyright protection; these materials are in the public domain. Among them:

- Titles
- Phrases
- Procedures, processes, or systems
- Any work of the United States government
- Any work with an expired copyright (this includes most work published in the United States before 1923, but some copyrights have been extended—check!)

## Fair Use of Copyrighted Works

Even if a work is protected by copyright, you can use a limited portion without infringing on the copyright owner’s rights if it qualifies as **fair use**. The doctrine of fair use allows you to include, for example, excerpts from a song in a music review, or quotations from a news article in an editorial, or lines from a poem, assuming, of course, you credit the writer. There are other qualifications for fair use as well: You cannot copy part of someone else’s work for profit, and you cannot “lessen the value of the original work.” To be on the safe side, just don’t publish more than a line or two of someone else’s work, and name the author in a credit. Please

read this nicely compact [summary](#) of the conditions of fair use from YouTube.

If you plan to use more than a line or two of someone’s work, find out who owns the copyright and contact them. In the old days, finding out who owned a copyright entailed a lot of schlepping to the library. Now, naturally, the information is at your fingertips on the Internet, which means if you do *not* go to the trouble of hunting up the copyright information, requesting permission to reprint material, and paying the fee to use that material if such a fee is imposed, you’re really falling down on the job—crashing to the floor, really.

## Creative Commons Licenses

The Creative Commons copyright license system was created in 2002 as a standardized way to grant authors, artists, etc. specific copyright permissions regarding the distribution and use of their work. There are six different types of licenses. Each license represents a different combination of conditions or rights for people (“licensees”) who wish to use (distribute, copy, remix, build upon, what have you) the original work. You can think of the Creative Commons licenses as offering “gradations” of copyright permissions on the spectrum between no copyright (public domain) and full copyright (“all rights reserved”).

The licenses and their terms are stated on the Creative Commons website. You can also find a more easily readable, condensed explanation on Wikipedia. Here’s the gist of it:

- There are four types of conditions, and each is represented by its own symbol and two-letter abbreviation.

1. 

Attribution (BY): Requires licensees to give credit to the original author or licensor in the manner specified by them.



Share-alike (SA): Requires licensees to distribute derivative works under the same license governing the original work.



Noncommercial (NC): Requires licensees to use the original work only for noncommercial purposes.



No Derivative Works (ND): Requires licensees to only use verbatim copies of the work and forbids them from creating or using derivative works.

- The six Creative Commons licenses are different combinations of those four conditions. Each is referred to as “CC” (“Creative Commons”) plus the relevant two-letter abbreviations.

1. Attribution alone (CC BY)
2. Attribution + NoDerivatives (CC BY-ND)
3. Attribution + ShareAlike (CC BY-SA)
4. Attribution + Noncommercial (CC BY-NC)
5. Attribution + Noncommercial + NoDerivatives (CC BY-NC-ND)
6. Attribution + Noncommercial + ShareAlike (CC BY-NC-SA)

## The Scholastic Press

The First Amendment to the Constitution prevents the United States government from abridging a citizen’s free speech. And principals and teachers at public schools—who are agents of the

government—may not abridge their students’ right to free speech, a right that was upheld in the 1969 landmark Supreme Court case [Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District](#). In this case, students protesting the Vietnam War wore black armbands to school, and the Court ruled that school administrators could not prohibit the students from this expression of free speech. The court declared that students’ First Amendment rights “do not stop at the schoolhouse door” unless that expression “materially disrupts class work or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others.”

In 1988, another Supreme Court decision altered that definition of students’ First Amendment rights. In this case, [Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier](#), a high school principal in Missouri removed two pages from the student newspaper before it was published because he objected to two stories, one about pregnancies at the school, the other about the effect of divorce on children. The student editors sued their school, charging that the principle had violated their First Amendment rights, and this time the Court ruled in favor of the school, stating that school officials did have the right to review the content of school-sponsored publications and to remove material they found “unsuitable.” The ruling did not say that school officials must review the material or censor it, only that, under certain circumstances, they may do so.

While the Hazelwood decision makes it far more difficult for scholastic journalists to have complete freedom of their presses, several states have overruled Hazelwood by passing laws guaranteeing student press rights, including the state of [Massachusetts](#). The others are Arkansas, California, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, and Oregon. For more about the enduring effects of the Hazelwood ruling, read this [Education Week feature](#), published on the 25th anniversary of the landmark decision. This [article](#) details a recent challenge to Iowa’s Student Free Expression Law, which was passed in 1989 in response to the Hazelwood decision.

## Student journalists are challenging the industry's traditional ethics – from [The Poynter Institute](#)

A socially conscious generation is pushing back against journalism's longtime standards of objectivity, neutrality and bias

By: [Taylor Blatchford](#)

November 3, 2021

***The Lead is a weekly newsletter that provides resources and connections for student journalists in both college and high school. [Sign up here](#) to have it delivered to your inbox every Wednesday morning during the school year.***

I went back to school this fall and started a part-time master's degree in journalism education at Kent State University. My first class focuses on teaching journalism ethics, so I've spent the past few months examining journalism's ethical standards and thinking about how they apply to student journalism.

My class is mostly made up of professional journalists and classroom teachers/student media advisers. The advisers' stories during our discussions have reminded me that student journalists face ethical issues that professionals rarely have to consider.

By the virtue of being a student, they're all part of the communities they're covering. Especially in high schools and in smaller colleges, it's hard to truly separate yourself from the people you're writing about. The basketball coach you're interviewing might also be your math teacher, and the student body president you're writing a profile on might be your friend's older sister.

While navigating these dilemmas, student journalists in a socially conscious generation are also pushing back against some of the industry's longtime standards of objectivity, neutrality and perceptions of bias. As students mobilized nationally for March for Our Lives protests against gun violence, the co-editor-in-chief of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School newspaper [told CNN's "Reliable Sources"](#) that "journalism is a form of activism."

Students are asking: Can journalists write about issues they have a personal stake in? How do we separate journalism and advocacy – or should we? How does social media play into all of this? Do personal identities make journalists biased, or do they make their work better?

These are discussions that are happening in the professional world, too, [particularly around race, police violence and protests](#). What makes student newsrooms different is one of their greatest strengths: their adaptability. When your staff fully turns over every four years, there's less pressure to do things the way they've

always been done. There's more room for radical change, new policies and experimentation.

This is the start of The Lead's series on the changing ethics of student journalism. In the next month, we'll hear from student journalists about how their newsrooms are approaching objectivity and other traditional ethical ideals. We'll explore how to codify ethical guidelines for your staff. We'll examine the sometimes-blurry line between journalism and activism.

Are ethics still essential to student journalism? Absolutely. But student journalists have realized something the rest of the industry should bear in mind: The way the industry has traditionally viewed objectivity and neutrality benefits a select group of journalists and harms many others. It's time to question our newsrooms' practices like we would any other organization and find a better, more inclusive way forward.

## One story worth reading

Is journalism a form of activism? Many journalists cringe at the term and think it compromises their ability to report fairly, but there's an argument to be made for the idea, Danielle Tcholakian [writes for Longreads](#). Journalists advocate for transparency, accountability and truth, and their most powerful stories often lead to tangible change.

"We observe, but we also prod and inquire," Matt Pearce of the Los Angeles Times told Tcholakian. "We sue when government officials don't give us records; newspapers'

past Supreme Court cases have won important victories for Americans' First Amendment rights. We publish investigations when we discover wrongdoing, and we are proud of the improvements those investigations bring to the lives of millions of people. We will refuse judges' orders and go to jail to protect important sources. We unionize to protect ourselves when we fear for our work. All that sounds like activism to me, even if journalists think the word carries a stigma.”

# 4. Chapter 4: Integrity and Unacceptable Practices

[From: NYU Journalism Handbook for Students](#)

## Ethics, Law and Good Practice

By Prof. Adam L. Penenberg

### **REVISED 2020**

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## INTEGRITY

Reporters critique the activities of other people and institutions, and what they publish can have a profound impact on the people, businesses and institutions they cover, as well as society at large. Journalists must live up to the highest standards of integrity, and by integrity we mean: truth, fairness, sincerity, and avoiding the appearance of a conflict of interest.

Since the Carter Institute of Journalism at NYU is an educational entity, rigorous honesty is required in research, analysis, and writing, as well as in discussion with professors and classmates. Lack of honesty in scholarship undermines the very foundation of the learning process and can have grave consequences for the student, including failure in a course or expulsion from the university.

All work on all platforms—the page, the screen, the Web—must be original. A student may not engage in “double-dipping” by handing in an assignment for one class then submitting the same or similar material to another without the permission of the instructor. Of course, in classes engaged in long-form work, professors might actually encourage a longer and more elaborate treatment of a previously executed idea, or the project in question is so labor-intensive that two professors may agree that the student can work on the piece for both classes. In all instances, however, the prior approval of the professors involved is imperative.

A student may not conduct research for one class and then use that research in another class—again, unless they have received explicit permission from both professors. Students who work on joint projects should note that they are equally responsible for the veracity of the work. Finally, a student may not submit for an assignment material that has already been published or was contracted by a professional publisher and rejected. Of course, students are very much encouraged to submit for publication stories produced in class. Consult your professor if you have questions.

## CARDINAL SINS

### *Plagiarism*

Journalists earn their living with words, and plagiarism—using someone else’s words as if they were your own—is, simply stated, stealing. It can take many forms. At its worst, plagiarism can be copying and pasting an article off the internet and slapping your own byline at the top. Or subtler: Lifting a quote from a wire service story or taking credit for another person’s idea.

Because of the internet, plagiarism is easier today than ever before; it’s also easier to catch. To avoid charges of plagiarism, a writer must paraphrase another’s words and state the source(s); credit another person’s ideas and theories; and cite any facts that are not commonly known. Be sure to label your notes carefully when consulting material in a library or online. It is possible to inadvertently plagiarize a work this way; if you do, you suffer the consequences nevertheless.

How to recognize acceptable paraphrasing vs. plagiarism

Original passage: “In 1938, near the end of a decade of monumental turmoil, the year’s number-one newsmaker was not Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Hitler, or Mussolini. It wasn’t Pope Pius XI, nor was it Lou Gehrig, Howard Hughes or Clark Gable. The subject of the most newspaper column inches in 1938 wasn’t even a person. It was an undersized, crooked-legged racehorse named Seabiscuit. (From *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*, by Laura Hillenbrand.)

The following is plagiarism:

“The biggest newsmaker in 1938—measured in newspaper column inches—wasn’t the president, nor was it Adolph Hitler or the pope. It

wasn't Babe Ruth or any Hollywood actor either. Why, it wasn't even human. It was a racehorse named Seabiscuit."

Why is this plagiarism? Because the writer has taken the spirit of Hillenbrand's passage and simply reordered a few sentences and substituted words—including a relatively obscure fact about more newspaper column inches being dedicated to Seabiscuit than any human in 1938. What's more, the writer didn't credit Hillenbrand's work.

Here is an acceptable paraphrase of this same passage:

"In 1938, the legendary racehorse Seabiscuit was so famous he accounted for more newspaper column inches than the president, pope and any Hollywood film star, according to Laura Hillenbrand in *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*.

Or simply, Seabiscuit was extremely popular in 1938. There's no need to cite Hillenbrand because this is a commonly known fact that cannot be reasonably disputed.

Here is another example:

Original passage: "Jaithirth 'Jerry' Rao was one of the first people I met in Bangalore—and I hadn't been with him for more than a few minutes at the Leela Palace hotel before he told me that he could handle my tax returns and any other accounting needs I had—from Bangalore. No thanks, I demurred. I already have an accountant in Chicago. Jerry just smiled. He was too polite to say it—that he may already be my accountant, or rather my accountant's accountant, thanks to the explosion in the outsourcing of tax preparation. 'This is happening as we speak,' said Rao, a native of Mumbai, formerly Bombay, whose Indian firm, Mphasis, has a team of Indian accountants able to do outsourced accounting work from any state in America and the federal government. 'We have tied up with several small and medium-sized CPA firms in America.'" (From *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, by Thomas L. Friedman.)

The following is plagiarism:

“India has become a major player in outsourced accounting, and, for all you know, someone in Bangalore might very well be crunching your tax returns—on behalf of your accountant. ‘This is happening as we speak,’ said Jaithirth Rao, whose firm, MphasiS, has ‘tied up with several small and medium-sized CPA firms in America.’”

It is unacceptable because the way it is written, it appears the writer interviewed Rao and got that original quote, when it originated in Thomas Friedman’s book.

Another example:

Original passage: “The stock market crashed on October 29, 1929, a Tuesday, the most disastrous session on Wall Street to date in a month of turmoil.” (*The Worst Hard Time*, by Timothy Egan.)

The following is not plagiarism: “The stock market crashed on Tuesday, October 29, 1929, following a month of economic jitters.”

It is acceptable because the day the stock market crashed, leading to the Great Depression, is a well-known fact.

Additional sticking points:

It can be tempting to lift highly technical passages (say, a description of BMW’s braking system or an in depth analysis of how Google’s search engine actually works). Don’t do it. Instead, find a way to describe these things in your own words. This also goes for company descriptions used in press releases. For example, HP describes itself as “a technology solutions provider to consumers, businesses and institutions globally.” You might describe it as “a seller of a broad range of technology products and services, including PCs, printers, and IT infrastructure.”

The bottom-line rule of attribution is: When in doubt, cite the source of your information. You can't go wrong then.

## *Fabrication*

Making up sources or information in an assignment is a serious ethical violation. In the real world, it could lead to immediate dismissal and the end of your career. In the late 1990s Stephen Glass created in part or whole cloth some two dozen stories he published in *The New Republic*, *Harpers* and *Rolling Stone*, which led to one of the biggest journalism scandals in history. Jayson Blair of *The New York Times* plagiarized and fabricated sources and material, which became a huge embarrassment to the *Times*, which is still recovering. Both are out of the profession.

### Shattered Glass: A lesson in what not to do

## Stephen Glass

From [Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](#)

**Stephen Randall Glass** (born September 15, 1972)<sup>[1]</sup> worked as a journalist for [The New Republic](#) from

1995 to 1998, until it was revealed that many of his published articles were fabrications. An internal investigation by *The New Republic* determined that the majority of stories he wrote either contained false information or were fictitious. Glass later acknowledged that he had repaid over \$200,000 to *The New Republic* and other publications for his earlier fabrications.<sup>[2]</sup>

Following the journalism scandal, Glass pursued a career in law. Although he earned a [Juris Doctor](#) from [Georgetown University Law Center](#) and passed the [bar exam](#) in New York and California, he was unable to become a licensed attorney in either state over concerns derived from his scandal.<sup>[3]</sup> Glass instead found work as a paralegal at the law firm Carpenter, Zuckerman & Rowley, serving as the director of special projects and trial team coordinator.<sup>[4]</sup>

Glass made a brief return to writing when he fictionalized his story in his 2003 novel *The Fabulist*.<sup>[5]</sup> The same year, the scandal was dramatized in the film [Shattered Glass](#), which was based on a [Vanity Fair](#) article of the same name and starred [Hayden Christensen](#) as Glass.

## Early life and education

Glass grew up in a Jewish family in the Chicago suburb of [Highland Park](#),<sup>[6][7]</sup> and attended [Highland Park High School](#).<sup>[8]</sup> He graduated from the [University of Pennsylvania](#) as University Scholar, where he was an executive editor of the [student newspaper](#), [The Daily Pennsylvanian](#).<sup>[4][9]</sup> His colleagues at *The Daily Pennsylvanian* included [Sabrina Erdely](#), who later became

involved in a fabricated story scandal owing to her [Rolling Stone](#) article “[A Rape on Campus](#)” and [Alan Sepinwall](#), currently the chief television critic for [Rolling Stone](#).<sup>[10][11]</sup>

Glass later graduated *magna cum laude* from [Georgetown University Law Center](#) with a [Juris Doctor](#) degree and was named John M. Olin Fellow in law and economics.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Career

### *The New Republic*

After his 1994 graduation from the University of Pennsylvania, Glass joined [The New Republic](#) in 1995 as an editorial assistant.<sup>[12]</sup> Soon thereafter, the 23-year-old Glass advanced to writing features. While employed full-time at TNR, he also wrote for other magazines including [Policy Review](#), [George](#), [Rolling Stone](#), [Harper's](#) and contributed to [Public Radio International's](#) (PRI) weekly hour-long program [This American Life](#), hosted by [Ira Glass](#) (no relation to Stephen).

Although Glass enjoyed loyalty from *The New Republic* staff, his reporting repeatedly drew outraged rebuttals from the subjects of his articles, eroding his credibility and leading to private skepticism from insiders at the magazine. The magazine's majority owner and editor-in-chief, [Martin Peretz](#), later said that his wife had told him that she did not find Glass's stories credible and had stopped reading them.<sup>[13]</sup>

In December 1996, the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#) (CSPI) was the target of a hostile article by Glass titled “Hazardous to Your Mental Health”. CSPI wrote a letter to the editor and issued a press release pointing out numerous inaccuracies and distortions and hinting at possible plagiarism.<sup>[14]</sup> The organization [Drug Abuse Resistance Education](#) (D.A.R.E.) accused Glass of falsehoods in his March 1997 article “Don’t You D.A.R.E.”<sup>[15]</sup> *The New Republic* defended Glass and editor [Michael Kelly](#) demanded CSPI apologize to him.<sup>[6]</sup>

In May 1997, Joe Galli of the [College Republican National Committee](#) accused Glass of fabrications in “Spring Breakdown”, his lurid tale of drinking and debauchery at the 1997 [Conservative Political Action Conference](#). A June 1997 article called “Peddling Poppy” about a [Hofstra University](#) conference on [George H. W. Bush](#) drew a letter from Hofstra reciting errors in the story.<sup>[15]</sup> On May 18, 1998, *The New Republic* published a story by Glass (by then an associate editor) entitled “Hack Heaven”, purportedly telling the story of a 15-year-old [hacker](#) who had penetrated a company’s computer network, then been hired by that company as a security consultant. The article opened as follows,

Ian Restil, a 15-year-old computer hacker who looks like an even more adolescent version of [Bill Gates](#), is throwing a tantrum. “I want more money. I want a [Miata](#). I want a trip to [Disney World](#). I want [X-Men](#) comic [book] number one. I want a lifetime subscription to [Playboy](#) – and throw in [Penthouse](#). [Show me the money! Show me the money! ...](#)” Across the table, executives from a

California software firm called Jukt Micronics are listening and trying ever so delicately to oblige. “Excuse me, sir,” one of the suits says tentatively to the pimply teenager. “Excuse me. Pardon me for interrupting you, sir. We can arrange more money for you.”<sup>[16]</sup>

[Adam Penenberg](#), a reporter with [Forbes](#) magazine, became suspicious when he found no search engine results for “Jukt Micronics”, found that “Jukt Micronics” had just a single phone line, and saw that its website was extremely amateurish.<sup>[17]</sup> When challenged, Glass claimed to have been duped by “Restil”. Glass took [Charles Lane](#), the lead editor of *The New Republic*, to the [Bethesda, Maryland](#) hotel at which Restil had purportedly met with the Jukt executives; Lane discovered that on the day of the claimed meeting the hotel’s conference room had been closed and the restaurant where the hackers supposedly ate dinner afterwards closes in the early afternoon.<sup>[6]</sup> Lane dialed a [Palo Alto](#) number provided by Glass and spoke with a man who identified himself as a Jukt executive; when he realized that the “executive” was actually Glass’s brother, who attended [Stanford University](#) in Palo Alto, he fired Glass.<sup>[18]</sup>

Lane later said:

We extended normal human trust to someone who basically lacked a conscience... We busy, friendly folks, were no match for such a willful deceiver... We thought Glass was interested in our personal lives, or our struggles with work, and we thought it was because he cared. Actually, it was all about sizing us up and searching for vulnerabilities.

What we saw as concern was actually contempt.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Aftermath

*The New Republic* subsequently determined that at least 27 of the 41 articles Glass wrote for the magazine contained fabricated material. Some of the 27, such as “Don’t You D.A.R.E.,” contained real reporting interwoven with fabricated quotations and incidents,<sup>[20]</sup> while others, including “Hack Heaven,” were completely made up.<sup>[12]</sup> In the process of creating the “Hack Heaven” article, Glass had gone to especially elaborate lengths to thwart the discovery of his deception by TNR’s [fact checkers](#): creating a website<sup>[21]</sup> and [voice mail](#) account for Jukt Micronics; fabricating notes of story gathering;<sup>[22]</sup> having fake business cards printed; and even composing editions of a fake computer hacker community newsletter.<sup>[12]</sup>

As for the balance of the 41 stories, Lane, in an interview given for the 2005 DVD edition of *Shattered Glass*, said, “In fact, I’d bet lots of the stuff in those other 14 is fake too. ... It’s not like we’re vouching for those 14, that they’re true. They’re probably not either”. *Rolling Stone*, *George* and *Harper’s* also re-examined his contributions. *Rolling Stone* and *Harper’s* found the material generally accurate yet maintained they had no way of verifying information because Glass had cited anonymous sources. *George* discovered that at least three of the stories Glass wrote for it contained fabrications.<sup>[23]</sup> Glass fabricated quotations in a profile piece and apologized to the article’s subject, [Vernon Jordan](#), an adviser to [Bill](#)

[Clinton](#) when he was president. A court filing for Glass's application to the [California bar](#) gave an updated count on his journalism career: 36 of his stories at *The New Republic* were said to be fabricated in part or in whole, along with three articles for *George*, two articles for *Rolling Stone* and one for *Policy Review*.<sup>[23]</sup> Glass also later wrote a letter admitting he fabricated the article he wrote for *Harper's* and the company retracted the story (the publication's first retraction in 165 years).<sup>[24]</sup>

Glass had contributed a story to an October 1997 episode of the [NPR](#) program [This American Life](#) about an internship at George Washington's former plantation and another to a December 1997 episode about time he spent as a telephone psychic. The program subsequently removed both segments from the Archives section of its website "because of questions about [their] truthfulness".<sup>[25][26]</sup>

## Later work

After journalism, Glass earned a [J.D.](#) degree at [Georgetown University Law Center](#). He then passed the [New York State bar examination](#) in 2000 but the Committee of Bar Examiners refused to certify him on its moral fitness test, citing ethics concerns related to his journalistic malpractice.<sup>[27]</sup> He later abandoned his efforts to be admitted to the bar in New York.<sup>[28]</sup> In 2003, Glass published a so-called "[biographical novel](#)", *The Fabulist*.<sup>[29]</sup>

Glass sat for an interview with the weekly news program [60 Minutes](#) timed to coincide with the release of his book. *The New Republic's* literary editor, [Leon](#)

[Wieseltier](#), complained, “The creep is doing it again. Even when it comes to reckoning with his own sins, he is still incapable of nonfiction. The careerism of his repentance is repulsively consistent with the careerism of his crimes”.<sup>[29]</sup> One reviewer of *The Fabulist* commented, “The irony—we must have irony in a tale this tawdry—is that Mr. Glass is abundantly talented. He’s funny and fluent and daring. In a parallel universe, I could imagine him becoming a perfectly respectable novelist—a prize-winner, perhaps, with a bit of luck”.<sup>[30]</sup>

Also in 2003, Glass briefly returned to journalism, writing an article about Canadian [marijuana](#) laws for *Rolling Stone*.<sup>[31]</sup> On November 7, 2003, Glass participated in a panel discussion on [journalistic ethics](#) at [George Washington University](#), along with the editor who had hired him at *The New Republic*, [Andrew Sullivan](#), who accused Glass of being a “serial liar” who was using “contrition as a career move”.<sup>[32]</sup>

It was very painful for me. It was like being on a guided tour of the moments of my life I am most ashamed of.

STEPHEN GLASS, REACTING TO [SHATTERED GLASS](#)<sup>[33]</sup>

A film about the scandal, [Shattered Glass](#), was released in October 2003 and depicted a stylized view of Glass’s rise and fall at *The New Republic*. Written and directed by [Billy Ray](#), it starred [Hayden Christensen](#) as Glass, [Peter](#)

Sarsgaard as [Charles Lane](#), Hank Azaria as [Michael Kelly](#) and [Steve Zahn](#) as [Adam Penenberg](#). The film, appearing shortly after [The New York Times](#) suffered a similar [plagiarism](#) scandal with the discovery of [Jayson Blair](#)'s fabrications, occasioned critiques of journalism by nationally prominent journalists such as [Frank Rich](#) and [Mark Bowden](#).<sup>[34]</sup>

Glass was out of the public eye for several years following the release of his novel and the film. In 2007, he was performing with a Los Angeles comedy troupe known as [Un-Cabaret](#), having earlier found employment at a small law firm, apparently as a paralegal.<sup>[35][36]</sup>

In 2015, Glass again made the news after reportedly sending *Harper's Magazine* a check for \$10,000 – what he was paid for the false articles – writing in the attached letter that he wanted “to make right that part of my many transgressions...I recognize that repaying Harper's will not remedy my wrongdoing, make us even, or undo what I did wrong. That said, I did not deserve the money that Harper's paid me and it should be returned”.<sup>[37]</sup> Glass has stated he has repaid \$200,000 to *The New Republic*, *Rolling Stone*, *Harper's* and the publisher of *Policy Review*.<sup>[38]</sup>

## Unsuccessful California Bar application

In 2009, Glass applied to join the [State Bar of California](#).<sup>[39]</sup> The Committee of Bar Examiners refused to certify him, finding that he did not satisfy California's moral fitness test because of his history of journalistic deception.<sup>[27]</sup> Insisting that he had reformed, Glass then

petitioned the State Bar Court's hearing department, which found that Glass possessed the necessary "good moral character" to be admitted as an attorney.<sup>[27][23]</sup>

The Committee of Bar Examiners sought review in the State Bar's Review Department and filed a Writ of Review, thereby petitioning the California Supreme Court to review the decision.<sup>[27]</sup> On November 16, 2011, the Supreme Court granted the petition, the first time in 11 years the court had granted review in a moral character case.<sup>[27]</sup> On January 3, 2012, Glass's attorneys filed papers with the Court arguing that his behavior had been beyond reproach for more than 13 years and this was proof that he had reformed.<sup>[40]</sup>

On November 6, 2013, the California Supreme Court heard arguments in Glass's case<sup>[41]</sup> and ruled unanimously against him in an opinion issued January 27, 2014. The lengthy opinion describes in minute detail the applicant's history, record, the bar's applicable standard of review, the appeal and its analysis of how Glass failed to satisfy the court's standards, concluding, "On this record, he has not sustained his heavy burden of demonstrating rehabilitation and fitness for the practice of law".<sup>[3]</sup> On that basis, Glass was denied admission to the California bar.<sup>[42]</sup>

## *Doctoring Photos or Videos*

It is not permissible to doctor or manipulate photos for the purpose of misleading, although it is all right to crop pictures or enhance clarity if blurry. With video it is OK to edit footage but not all right to alter subjects' appearance or likewise distort reality. Increasingly

photo manipulation is being used as an explanatory technique: Putting George Bush's head onto a wrestler's body for satirical purposes, for example. This is acceptable only if there will be no confusion between the photo manipulation—satirical or otherwise—and reality.

### *Fictional Devices*

Names, dates and places should never be altered in any story, even to protect a source's identity. If publishing those facts could lead to retribution against a source, or if compassion dictates omitting these facts from a story, they should simply be cut (with an explanation to the reader). Composites, which are characteristics and histories of multiple characters blended into one, should never be used.

## Society of Professional Journalists Ethics Case Studies The New York *Times* and Jayson Blair

[By Adrian Uribarri, SPJ Ethics Committee](#)

**WHAT:** Jayson Blair advanced quickly during his tenure at *The New York Times*, where he was hired as a full-time staff writer after his internship there and others at *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post*. Even accusations of inaccuracy and a series of corrections to his reports on Washington, D.C.-area

sniper attacks did not stop Blair from moving on to national coverage of the war in Iraq. But when suspicions arose over his reports on military families, an internal review found that he was fabricating material and communicating with editors from his Brooklyn apartment – or within the *Times* building – rather than from outside New York.

Some *Times* staffers, opposed to what they viewed as favoritism by Executive Editor Howell Raines, blamed a star system that allowed Blair to advance unusually fast in an extremely competitive, mostly veteran environment. Blair's former boss, Jonathan Landman, said race played a large part in the African American writer's ascendancy.

The findings of a 25-member committee headed by Allan Siegal, an assistant managing editor, led to the appointment of a public editor and stricter editorial policies. But staffing changes and higher standards could not change what happened:

The *Times*'s reputation was deeply tarnished. Raines and Managing Editor Gerald Boyd resigned in a cloud of mismanagement. Journalism, in general, suffered perhaps the biggest blow to its credibility in U.S. history.

Question: How does the *Times* investigate problems and correct policies that allowed the Blair scandal to happen?

**WHO:** The consequences of Blair's actions are so broad that it is important to have representatives from all staff levels, as well as journalists outside the *Times* staff, weigh in on corrective steps. Leading

this group should be one or several highly ethical consensus-builders who can solicit and synthesize ideas from throughout the profession.

In the case of the *Times*, stakeholders range from the humble retiree who simply reads his paper in the morning to the power-wielding diplomat who relies on foreign-policy reports to inform her decisions. Journalists, too, lose ground when a colleague lowers the public's value of their work. As a group, biggest stakeholders are citizens of democracies, which depend on journalists to grow trust in readers with accurate reporting.

**WHY:** The Blair case raises questions about hiring, management and overall editorial policy.

First, there is the issue of relative inexperience in a super-high-stakes newsroom. Is it fair to senior staffers to allow a fresh-out-of-college writer to step into the ranks? More importantly, is it fair to expect such an inexperienced writer, however talented, to produce reporting as sharp as that of a decorated correspondent? While a pure meritocracy allows an individual of any experience level to fill any role, talent in the absence of experience could lead to diminished professionalism: Blair's ability to impress editors with his writing may have led to him feeling that facts are less important than prose.

Second, there is the question of who is responsible for letting Blair go so far. Is it the editor who hired him straight from the University of Maryland? How about successive editors, who, despite their mediocre

evaluations, did not object loudly enough to Blair's promotions? Could the executive and managing editors, with their big-picture roles and busy days, truly be responsible for one staffer's malfeasance?

Third, there must be a better way. Is it enough to know what went wrong and tighten the reins on practices such as anonymous sources? Or does the *Times* need an auditor, someone it pays for a scolding? Why should an outsider be allowed to make recommendations on better internal practices? Then again, how could an insider, in earshot of the mess itself, lead the committee to fix things?

**HOW:** The *Times* decided that to remedy the nasty ramifications of the Blair scandal, it would commission an insider, along with others in and outside the *Times* newsroom, to investigate problems and suggest changes. The insider, Siegal, decided the *Times* should hire an outsider (who would be former *Life* magazine editor Daniel Okrent) to suggest further improvements. And *Times* editorial policy changed to reflect a much more cautious, conservative atmosphere concerning staff promotions and, especially, verification of reporting. A notable example of the latter aspect regards anonymous sources. In terms of staffing, the *Times* went so far as to require written evaluations for any candidates transferring between posts.

A particularly difficult aspect of the fallout, although one welcome by staffers who felt marginalized, was the dual resignation of Raines and Boyd. That development, at least in the view of Publisher Arthur Sulzberger, was for the greater good of the *Times*. Symbolically, their

departures made it possible for observers to view the *Times* as a reformed institution.

# 5. Chapter 5: Potential Conflicts of Interest

## NYU Journalism Handbook for Students

### [NYU Journalism Handbook for Students](#)

Ethics, Law and Good Practice

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By Prof. Adam L. Penenberg

#### **REVISED 2020**

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

In an era of great and growing dissatisfaction with the media, it is imperative that journalists avoid conflicts of interest, defined as situations in which there are competing professional, personal and/or financial obligations or interests that compete with the journalist's obligation to their outlet and audience. Anything that could suggest the appearance of a conflict of interest should be revealed to an editor/professor and to the reader when appropriate.

### **WRITING ABOUT FRIENDS AND FAMILY MEMBERS**

Most newspapers bar reporters from writing about, or including quotes from friends or family members, although there may be some exceptions, if the reporter is open about it. In an autobiography or memoir, obviously it is fine. Even here, however, there is an obligation: the writer should be transparent and stipulate the relationship, whatever form that may take. When a reporter is sent out to sample opinion or find an expert, those sources should not be relations, unless the journalist can honestly claim the relationship won't sway what they write in one way or the other. In other words, would the reporter pull punches because they're a friend of the source? That's why it is usually a good idea to stay clear of using friends and relatives in articles in most instances.

### **PRESS JUNKETS**

Most reputable news organizations prohibit contributors from participating in press junkets, which are trips offered to journalists that are paid for by the entities the reporters cover, i.e., movie studios, electronics companies, government agencies.

### **ACCEPTING HOSPITALITY**

If a reporter is interviewing a CEO at a company or at the executive's home, it is fine to accept a sandwich and a soft drink. At a restaurant, however, the reporter should pay for the meal or drink. Drinking alcohol on the job can be problematic. The *Kalamazoo Gazette* fired a reporter and photographer in 2005 for participating in a drinking game while researching a story on problem drinking

on college campuses. An editor claimed the transgression compromised the paper's integrity.

### **GIFTS**

Journalists generally should not accept any gifts from sources or from the subjects of their stories. Sometimes sources will send tokens of their appreciation after the fact, which is to say after publication. Every media outlet has its own policy on accepting such gifts. At the Carter Institute of Journalism, students will be asked to return all such tokens, if possible, if worth more than \$25. If abroad in cultures where refusing hospitality could be interpreted as rudeness, it may be permissible to accept food, private lodging and/or small tokens of affection or gratitude. Similarly, in some cultures (Japan, for example) it is appropriate for a reporter to present a small gift to a source before the interview starts, especially if the interview is being conducted in the source's home. As always, use common sense.

### **FREE TICKETS**

While some publications, like *The New York Times*, prohibit their reporters from accepting free tickets to a performance they are writing about or reviewing, most others allow staff writers and freelancers to procure press passes to movie screenings, concerts and theatrical productions. The policy at the Carter Institute of Journalism is: A student can accept free passes to an event they are covering as part of or preparation for a story, but should not take a free ticket to *another* event beyond the one being reviewed, written about, or used as background material. The same goes for review copies of books, compact discs, DVDs and access to subscription-only websites.

### **PAYING SOURCES**

No reputable news organization or reporter pays a source for information. It is possible to take a source out for a meal, or, in special cases and when disclosed to editors and audience, to pay for travel for a source to reach a reporter.

### **QUID PRO QUO**

A reporter should not guarantee an interview subject favorable coverage in exchange for access.

### **INVESTMENTS (STOCK, BONDS, VENTURE CAPITAL)**

Journalists must avoid all financial entanglements (stock ownership, financial transactions, etc.) with the people and companies they cover.

### **POLITICAL AND CHARITABLE DONATIONS**

If a reporter donates to a politician running for office (say, the mayor) they shouldn't also cover the election—that includes not only the mayor but also the mayor's opponents. Be forewarned: If you donate money to a politically active organization (Planned Parenthood or the National Rifle Association) your objectivity may be called into question if you write about issues of interest to these organizations.

### **EXPRESSING OPINIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE**

Nowadays it's common for journalists—and journalism students—to express opinions and comment on the opinions of others, particularly online. What a journalist chooses to express and what the journalist writes about for publication could potentially raise ethical concerns. For example, if you express an opinion about stem cell research and bash governmental policy and then go on to write a hard news article about stem cell research, readers could conceivably question your objectivity.

# 6. Chapter 6: What's in a Newspaper (or Online News Website)?

## What's in a Newspaper?

(from [Journalism 101: Libretext](#))

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*“It is the newspaper’s duty to print the news and raise hell.”* – Wilbur F. Storey

A newspaper contains all sorts of things: headlines, photos, graphics, sports scores, weather forecasts, gossip columns, obituaries, TV schedules, police reports, birth announcements, bird sightings, sudokus, etc. etc.–plus, in the digital editions, there are also all sorts of videos, audios, commentaries from readers, web links, and a million other bits of information and communication. Each of these is of great interest to some readers. But the most important things in the newspaper are its news stories, its opinion pieces, and its advertisements. Please note that news stories, opinion pieces, and advertisements are three very different things.

# News

The definition of news is changing as newspapers respond to a changing world. Once, it was “news” that someone in Newport, Rhode Island held a dinner party, and then for decades no one remotely cared, so it was not news, and now it is news again (read the [Style section](#) of *The New York Times*!). But even though the definition of news is changing, there are some traditional criteria for what is important enough or interesting enough to be considered news. This is called the **news value**:

- **Timeliness** – A story that just happened is more important than a story from the past; remember, the word is NEWS.
- **Proximity** – A story happening nearby gains news value because it may impact readers.
- **Consequence** – A story that directly affects the readers gains news value.
- **Prominence** – Stories that involve important people are traditionally more important than stories involving the rest of us (though great reporters with beautiful writing skills produce riveting stories about the rest of us).
- **Human interest** – Stories increase in news value when they contains oddity, emotion, or conflict.
- **Exclusivity** – Scoops still count; breaking a story that no one else has still has great value.



The front pages of various newspapers after the 2008 election of Barack Obama as America's 44th and first black president, a reflection of the story's enormous news value.

Newspaper editors must decide every day which stories in their community to cover, which ones to ignore, and where and how to display each one on the printed or online page. They make these decisions based on several factors: news value, staffing, space, and time. Some days, the editors really wrestle with these decisions, but lots of days—in fact, I'd say most of the time—when they hear that something's happened in their town or the world, they know instantly whether it's newsworthy, and they leap immediately into a frenzy of bossing the reporters around. These editors possess the elusive quality called news judgment: they know when something is news and when it isn't, and, interestingly, they often can't explain how they know. More on this soon.

News stories are objective reports of the truth, so far as such a thing can be ascertained. They don't contain a reporter or editor's opinion. They are written by reporters on the newspaper's staff; or the newspaper buys them from wire services (such

as [UPI](#), [AP](#), [Bloomberg](#), or [Reuters](#)) or collects (and verifies) them from sources on the web.

**News stories** can be broken into four broad categories:

A **hard news story** is a response to an event. These are stories on fires, crimes, speeches, votes in Congress, testimony in court, hurricanes, etc. These are stories that essentially tell the readers *what happened*. Reporters and correspondents assigned to various beats are responsible for keeping track of what's going on in their beats, so they know when something “happens”—and of course editors also know what happens by reading other newspapers and the web and wire services and listening to TV and the radio. These are also called spot or breaking news stories.

A **feature story** is a response to an idea; feature stories may be human-interest stories, profiles of individuals, or stories on trends or innovations. These are stories that essentially describe for readers *what something is like*. Editors and reporters come up with these story ideas, and there is no magic formula for how to think them up. My rule of thumb is: If you are alive and aware and paying attention to your world, you will find stories everywhere. If something interests you, if it matters to you, if you want to tell your friends about something and you know they wouldn't be bored, it's a story.

An **investigative story** often springs from news events; they are in-depth stories reported over a long period of time and are usually designed to expose corruption or misdeeds.

**News analysis** is explanatory journalism, written by a reporter with expertise in a complicated subject who breaks it down to make it understandable to the reader and interviews experts for their opinions. It is not an opinion piece.

Some other news terms:

- **Folo story** – A story that follows up on a news story about breaking events (“folo” is short for “follow-up”). The breaking story will contain much information but will not be complete; elements of the story will come to light in the days to come. A

folo story can be either hard news or a feature and would appear in the paper the next day. (For example, if the breaking story is about a tsunami, folo news stories would include more information about what happened when, what caused it, the number of victims, the status of survivors and aid efforts, and the status of investigations; folo feature stories might include a profile of the place, a detailed first-person account, or background information on weather science, economics, politics, history, technology, etc.)

- **Sidebar** – A shorter side story accompanying a main news story that covers a related angle or provides additional information. It’s called a sidebar because in a print newspaper, it was placed alongside the main story, or beneath it. (For example, if the main story is about the tsunami, sidebars published concurrently might include a timeline of events, a compilation of immediate eyewitness reactions, or a summary of official government statements.)
- **Package** – Anchored by the main story, a package includes one or more sidebars with related information, photos, graphics (e.g. charts, diagrams, maps), a profile of a major stakeholder, or a news analysis piece. Online newspaper packages may include links and multimedia as well.
- **Dateline** – The location from which a story is filed.
- **Byline** – The name(s) of the reporter(s) who reported and wrote the story.

## Opinion

Opinion pieces, unlike news stories, contain the writer’s opinion, and they appear in several places in the paper, which should be clearly marked. Opinions are what they sound like—the opinions of

staff members or guest writers—but nonetheless, as with everything else in journalism, the opinions must be based on facts. This is often news (ha!) to novice journalists, who believe you can write pretty much anything you want in the paper as long as it’s “only” your opinion or it’s meant in jest, but this is not the case. (Lots more on all of this later, when you write your own opinion piece and when you study the laws of libel.) Opinions are identified by their placement on the paper’s pages or labels on the website. If you ever read something and you aren’t sure whether or not it’s an opinion piece, the print or digital newspaper you’re reading hasn’t done its job. Opinion should always be clearly labeled.

## Types of Opinion Pieces

The **editorial** is usually published in the paper’s first section, on the last interior page, on the page’s left side. On a paper’s website, it’s identified as “The Editorial.” It offers the opinion of “the newspaper” itself on various topics of the day. Because the staff of a newspaper has access to information and a commitment to civic involvement, and because a newspaper is influential in its community, its “official” opinion is valuable to readers.

The editorial is written by an editorial page editor and his or her staff, who work in an office separate from the newsroom. This physical separation is important, as it underscores the philosophical separation between the editorial page staff—whose job it is to figure out and express the newspaper’s opinion about the news—and the regular editors and writers at work in the newsroom, whose job it is to keep their opinions and indeed their feelings out of their articles. Consider how this works: If the editorial staff of a newspaper decides the paper is going to endorse Candidate A for governor, then it is clearly in everyone’s best interest if these people think this

decision through, discuss it, and write it up in a room far away from the newsroom where reporters and editors are racing around on deadline covering the things that happened that day on Candidate A's campaign trail, including the possibly ugly things, scandals, and missteps. The reporters can't be influenced by the editorial staff's preferences. The reporters must carry on "[without fear or favor](#)."

**Columns** are opinion pieces written in the first person by members of the newspaper staff or guest columnists. They're called columns because usually they're laid out in a column, and the columns appear throughout the paper. They are often pegged to this day's news.

**Op-ed pieces** are opinion pieces written by guest writers and experts. They're called op-eds because they appear opposite the editorial page.

**Letters to the editor**, and other user-generated comments submitted to digital newspapers, come from the readers. You should promise yourself that at least once in your life, you'll write a letter to the editor of your paper—not just a comment beneath a story online, but a letter.

## Advertisements

Ads are things that people pay to have printed in the paper. Advertisements should contain the truth, of course, but they don't have to run out and be all *explicit* with the truth or anything, given that this is a capitalist land. So if you advertise that your popsicles have "the flavor of FRUIT FRESHNESS!" and lots of mommies believe that this means the popsicles contain fruit, while really it means the popsicles contain chemicals that give a fruit-like flavor—well, that's the mommies' concern, isn't it? And in capitalist America, yes it is. But a newspaper's advertisements should indeed tell the



he walked into class and said, “Good morning boys and girls how in the hell are you?” He didn’t pause between the sentences. He was a brilliant editor, and if you worked for him at the *Chapel Hill Weekly*, or if you got into his class, you never forgot the man. One of his students, an Andover graduate named Jeff MacNelly, himself a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, immortalized him in the comic strip [Shoe](#), about a grumpy bird editor who wears tennis shoes and smokes a cigar.

I took Mr. Shumaker’s journalism course more than 30 years ago, and my memory isn’t great, but I recall that he often wore a brown corduroy jacket—light brown really, sort of vomit-colored when you got right down to it—and his skin was wrecked the way smokers’ skin is. But he was handsome; he had presence. He walked into class and said that funky greeting in a gravelly southern drawl, real slowly, as if it took an exhausting energy to greet us little weasels in our little student chairs, and we were all transfixed. He terrified us; we adored him; we wanted his attention. Everybody called him Shu.

It was as if we were in love! You know how that is, when you write something your crush is going to read, so you want it to be fabulous because your crush—that smart, witty, powerful and clever soul—understands the world in some mysterious, god-like way and will therefore appreciate how brilliant you are and how great your writing is. Naturally, this is nonsense; your crush is an idiot with the critical abilities of a lawn slug (which you will discover when you observe your crush flirting with someone who isn’t you). But Mr. Shumaker was no idiot; he was the real thing. He was witty and clever, and he did understand in some mysterious, god-like way just exactly how the world worked.

Now, police officers understand how the world works, too, or understand a part of it, anyway—the part that involves crime and Dunkin’ Donuts coffee and violent conflict. Similarly, politicians know their own world (coffee delivered by an aide, someone about your age). As do chefs (brew that coffee properly in a carafe!), and nurses (how we wish we had time for a cup of coffee), and mathematicians (the empty coffee pot’s burning because we got

distracted by an equation). Astronomers, bond traders, obstetricians, the social glitterati, competitive ice dancers—you name it—all these different people understand how their own particular world works, even though their worlds can be a real mystery to the rest of us. Students, too—you know how your school world works, including (or perhaps especially) those true things about your world that aren't well understood by, or are deliberately kept secret from, adults and other outsiders.

But what was so incredible about Shu is that he seemed to know how ALL these worlds worked. Of course, he couldn't have known EVERYTHING about EVERYTHING on the planet, but he knew how things tended to get done in most civic and social realms, and he had an unerring understanding of human nature, which of course is at the root of most news stories. So when one of our articles crossed his desk, he knew if the article accurately portrayed a world or if the article was somehow off. He knew if information was wrong or missing—even minute or esoteric information—and he also knew if we had “steered” the story somewhere it didn't belong, so that it wasn't necessarily inaccurate, but it hadn't entirely hit the truth.

Plus—and this was the part that really killed us—he also knew exactly why a story was off and whether it was our fault or not. It was as though, under his eyes, our bad sentences peeled themselves off the paper and pointed back at our solar plexuses, right into our souls. The convoluted sentences, the vague ones, the ones (so obviously!) missing a crucial fact, the ones subtly (ha!) promoting a point of view, the ones (ugh, it's embarrassing) showing off—every one of these sentences betrayed something about our characters. We'd become enamored of a source. We'd become afraid of one. We'd run out of gas. We'd been lazy, or smarty-pants pompous, or in love with our own writing. He knew it when we didn't even know it ourselves; he could read it in our sentences.

And Shu was not the only editor who could do this! So could Dick Oliver at the *New York Daily News*, who was my journalism teacher at Columbia. (He edited our stories with a red felt marker, so they came back looking like road kill.) So could Sylvia Lane and

Joe Goodman, my editors at the *Winston-Salem Journal*: Sylvia edited—that is to say, psychoanalyzed her reporters—with grace and compassion, while Goodman did it a bit differently; his office is the one I described as “the Rage Cage,” so enough said about that. Andrew Gully at the *Boston Herald* did it while wearing a small diamond earring and swearing in a Boston accent.

The truth is, all great newspaper editors have this magical knowledge about how the world works, and also how their reporters work. They don’t read like normal people—they read like witchdoctors. And if you are very lucky, you will work for one of these editors some day. They can see inside your soul; they will show you your character, your gifts, and your weaknesses. I call them editors from hell.

You will love and adore these people—yes, because they will show you your soul, but far more critically, because they will catch your errors and correct them. That is the truth. It is the editor’s job to catch your mistakes before your stories get into print, and they will do it. Their Martian antennae (or whatever it is) will vibrate when they read in your seventh paragraph that the zoning board approved 1.4 acres for the parking lot—they will somehow *know* that it must be more than that, or less—and they will protect you from your mistakes. So they are editors from heaven, too!

## The Newsroom

A newsroom looks just as you imagine it does—a space with the reporters’ desks laid out to the horizon. The managing editor has an office with glass walls; at my paper, as you know, we called this the Rage Cage. Everyone in the entire room is always aware of what’s happening in the Rage Cage—and all around the room for that matter—even as everyone is also intensely focused on his or her

own work. Therefore, of course, the rooms can be seething nests of gossip, which in some offices might be distracting but in my old newsroom just added to the sparkling atmosphere.



A panorama of The Daily Telegraph's newsroom in London.

Here are the jobs in a typical newsroom, with most newspaper staffs now adding online tasks to the job descriptions below:

**Publisher** – The paper's owner in some cases, but this is becoming increasingly rare in the era of corporate ownership.

**Editor-in-Chief** – The boss of everything in the newspaper except advertisements and the editorial.

**Editorial Page Editor** – The boss of the editorial and op-ed pages of the newspaper.

**Managing Editor** – Usually the hands-on manager of the newspaper.

**Section editors** – Editors in charge of each section, such as Metro, Features, Living/Arts, Business, Sports, Photography, Multimedia, Graphics, Library/Info Technology, and Production.

**Investigative reporters** – These are usually the most talented and experienced reporters, who work on special stories.

**Beat reporters** – These are usually experienced reporters who cover a specific area, such as politics, courts, the police, social services, business, the environment, etc. Beat reporters usually tell their editors each morning what story they'll be working on that day.

**General assignment reporters** – These reporters don't have a beat, so they are free to cover any story that comes up. Sometimes

they tell the editors about stories they'd like to do; often, the editors assign stories to them. This is your spot or breaking news team.

**Cub reporters** – The newest members of the staff. They often start out by writing obituaries. This is not because obits are dull and gruesome chronicles of death. Actually, obituaries are about people's lives—they are feature stories about people who happen to be dead. And they teach young reporters crucial lessons about how to do things right in a newsroom.

**Deadlines** – Deadlines are not people, but they are entities in a newsroom nonetheless, and they affect everyone the way weather does in the summer, charging the atmospherics, shaping the plans. A news story is a living thing, and time is an element that defines its shape and depth.

In the old days, at the morning newspaper, deadlines were set late in the day, and the printing press rolled at night. Mornings in the newsroom felt calm. People would read the papers, drink their coffee, smoke their cigarettes, and hack and spit. (The old days were disgusting but fun.) Around 9 or 10 a.m., the editors gather in a conference room or in the managing editor's office for a **budget meeting**, in which they discussed which stories would be pursued that day. (Movies about newspapers always do a great job portraying budget meetings; I recommend [All the President's Men](#) and [The Paper](#).)



Reporters in the newsroom of The New York Times in 1942.

As the morning rolled on, reporters made phone calls to sources or left the newsroom to interview people or track down documents. At 3 p.m. or so, the editors gathered for the afternoon meeting, in which they learned how the reporting was going and decided which

stories would appear in tomorrow's paper and where they would be placed.

Then more cigarettes. The reporters smoked as they clacked away at the keyboard. When evening fell, the editors began roaming the newsroom, lurking over people's shoulders. They wanted the articles. They wanted them NOW. They had to read them, edit them, find and fix the mistakes in them. And the curtain of deadline had fallen.

These days, people don't smoke inside buildings, and a paper's news cycle isn't necessarily determined by the run of the printing press because stories are posted—and updated—on the paper's website constantly. Thus, the whole idea of deadlines is changing, and most papers are only beginning to sort out how their deadlines work.

For that matter, most newspapers now are trying to figure out how they should work in the new world of the web. What they do know, however, is that no matter how their news is delivered, they are in the business of digging it up and making sense of it for the people. So their reporters still wake up, drink coffee, read or listen to the news to learn what's happened in the world while they slept, and formulate their story ideas for the day. The editors still have budget meetings at 9 a.m. and again in mid-afternoon. And they and their reporters still race against an afternoon or evening deadline by which time the first version of their stories must be filed. So they gather—and put into perspective—the information they've found and verified up until their deadline, and they publish. Inevitably, the story, of course, will continue to unfold—time does not stop. But for today, their work is done.

# 7. Chapter 7: Reporting and Writing Skills

[From Journalism 101: Libretext](#)

## Introduction

*“If your mother says she loves you, check it out.”*

– Anonymous

That’s a funny line up there about your mother; though, maybe if you think about it too much, it moves from funny to kind of desperately sad. But that’s why it’s such a perfect quotation for this chapter on reporting. Because when you report a story, what you are really doing is hunting to find the honest truth. Not the cliché truth, or the popular wisdom, or the thing that someone said was true, but the real truth—frank, weird, ugly.

We shouldn’t even say your job is to “find” the truth, because that implies the true story is out there somewhere, intact and gift-wrapped with a pretty, little ribbon, waiting for you to “find” it and bring it home to the newsroom. Yes, the truth is sometimes like that. But, most of the time, it isn’t—it’s a lot messier, and it’s usually scattered around in bits and pieces. Furthermore, the truth changes over time, and it looks different from different angles.

So if you ever believed that fiction was the place for complex truths while journalism was the place for simpleminded chronicles of life’s surface, think again. Truth can be stranger than fiction. Indeed, truth is often stranger than fiction *by far*. And it’s not that easy to discover.

At the country’s big newspapers, the most experienced and talented reporters are called “Investigative Reporters,” and they

tackle large and complex stories, often working in teams. But the title “Investigative Reporter” could rightly apply to every reporter at the paper—even the baby cubbies, even the student reporters—because reporting is essentially investigating. When you report a story, you work just like a private eye.

First you gather information, which is called “doing legwork,” and yes, you must use your legs to get out of the newsroom and dig around, see things for yourself, ask people questions, and track down documents. Of course it is possible to gather information on the Internet. But you can’t report a story from your desk, on your butt. You must learn things firsthand. And when your legwork is done, you must double back and verify everything you thought you knew to begin with or learned along the way. If your mother said she loves you, now’s the time you check it out.

And all the while that you are reporting, you must keep your mind supple enough to follow the story where it takes you—that is to say, your work is both physical (up you go, out the door) and intellectual. A story is a puzzle, and you are the investigator who must gather the pieces and fit them together, and you can’t squish the pieces where they don’t fit just because you want them to. That’s another way of saying what you already learned in the introduction to this part of the book: you mustn’t “steer” your story.

Instead, as you work, you might find your initial hunches were correct, but you might also find you were barking up the wrong tree entirely, and the story that is emerging is different than the one you thought you’d be writing. You must let that story emerge. Furthermore, you must be aware at all times of your own biases, and course-correct as you go, to keep the bias out of your way and out of your story.

Finally, you will be doing all this work against a deadline, and that pressure will help you concentrate, but it can also cause panic and mistakes. Thus, you must be constantly aware of the element of time, as you race against it to capture as much of the truth as you can find before you must stop reporting and start writing. The story

may continue to unfold, but you can catch up with it the next day, in a follow-up story.

And how to do all this? To be perfectly honest, you will learn how to report a story only by going out and reporting one. For my first story at Columbia Journalism School, for example, I was sent to a polling place on Election Day. I was excited and eager and started interviewing voters. I walked right up to them in the polling place and asked whom they'd voted for and how they felt it was going out there, blah blah, and all at once a nice policeman came over to inform me that the press was not allowed within 100 feet of a polling place and I was most welcome to go to jail. I talked him out of that, but I was mortified and a little frightened. And you too will learn how to report a story only by bumbling your way through it a few times until you finally get the hang of the process. I'll describe that process in the next section, but you won't really register what it says; the information will lurk around blurrily in your mind's eye until you go out on your first story. Then it will come into focus.

Let's practice. Let's report an imaginary story. Let's look at the problem of teenage sexuality. Oh wait, there's already a bias in that idea: who says teenage sexuality is a "problem"? For that matter, what the heck is "teenage sexuality"? Okay forget that story, it's too fraught already. Let's tackle something important. Let's look at the parking situation at the hockey rink.

No, seriously, there is quite a bit of grumbling around town about how there aren't enough parking spaces in the lot beside the hockey complex on the south edge of Andover's campus. Maybe the problem is simply that there are two rinks there, which means lots and lots of skaters on the ice, most of whom aren't Phillips Academy students (who would walk to the rinks); they're young skaters, pee-wee hockey players (pee-wee skaters? Note to self: Find out what they are called) driven to the rink by parents who couldn't carpool even if they wanted to because the skaters might be wee, but their gear isn't, and you need pretty much an entire SUV to hold just one bagful of it, not to even mention the sticks.

So you must find out what's going on here—what is the problem?

And maybe it's simply that the lot isn't big enough for all those kids and their gear. Now this would be a nice news story: whoever designed and built the complex screwed up in a big way. On the other hand, maybe there is plenty of parking, it's just that the primo spaces near the building are always filled, so the parents must lug those duffels a long way in the freezing cold. In which case, who could blame them for grumbling, but that's a different story. Literally.

So you wander out there to see for yourself how many rinks there are (two), and how many kids on the ice (plenty, but lots of them are figure skaters—with tiny white skates! and tiny leggings!), and how many SUVs are parked out back, and where exactly they're parked.

And you note that while all the spots are taken, no one has parked in the handicapped zone, no one has plowed onto the curb, no one's idling in the circle waiting for a space. So tonight, anyway, there appear to be enough spaces, just exactly enough—unless someone has dropped off his kid and driven home, and will drive back after practice, which is quite the polluting way to raise the future Michelle Kwan and extremely irksome to the ferrying parent who is hardly out of the bloody car before he has to get back into it—but that's another story, again. And indeed, maybe there's no news story here after all—there seems to be enough parking—but maybe there's a feature story here about the living hell of schlepping your kid endlessly to sports. So here's what you have learned from this tale, and what you will study in the upcoming part of the book:

**How to report a story:** You will learn lots of techniques for reporting, but the basic idea is simple: Go To The Hockey Rink. You report a story by going out there (wherever “there” is) to learn for yourself what is happening. Talk to people. Listen. As you report a story and learn more and more about the truth of things, the story will evolve, often becoming very different from what you thought it was when you started.

Anyone can park herself at a computer, Google something or someone, and write a “story” about it. That's not what journalists do, though; that is not reporting. Journalists unearth and gather

information firsthand, make coherent sense of it, and verify it. That is what makes their work valuable.

**How to write a story:** When you write for a newspaper, your purpose is to tell your reader as much information as you can, quickly, clearly, and factually. Thus, you write news stories very differently from the way you write a novel or a short story. When you write fiction, YOU matter—you, the writer, the consciousness at work behind the words—and when people read your novel or short story, they commune with you, consciousness to consciousness, soul to soul. When you write for a newspaper, however, no one wants your consciousness or soul or anything else about you on the page. Particularly in a hard news story, you are simply the conduit for conveying information from the rink to the reader without interfering in any way; indeed, you want the reader to receive the information as if by an intravenous injection to the head. Thus, you write cleanly, concisely, but potently, selecting the right tone for the emotional register of each story. Writing a feature story about a mother balancing her checkbook behind the wheel of her Odyssey as she idles in front of the hockey rink, craving a cigarette her kids don't know she ever used to smoke, you might choose the tone of humor. Or (if you want to earn an A in the course) a tone of profound sympathy.

Before you go out on that first story, memorize these 3 rules. You must:

1. Identify yourself as a reporter before you start talking to anybody about any aspect of a story. It is crucial that people know what they're getting into when they talk to you or hand over documents—in person, or on the phone, or via email or fax. They need to understand that you are not interacting with them in the private realm, but that in fact you are going to share their words or information with other people—maybe thousands of other people. No one should interact with you in innocence of this, and if you allow people to think they're dealing with you privately, you are deceiving them. In this

business, you must never deceive your sources, your readers, or (frankly) yourself.

2. Verify what people say to you and don't print a source's quote if it isn't true. I know this sounds obvious, but every year, one or two of my students include absurd quotes in their stories and then argue (*really argue* with me) that the quote belongs in the story because the source "truly" said it! When this happens, I cover my face with my hands. I rub my eyes. I watch the psychedelic colors behind my lids and breathe deeply. Then I say, "Yes, it is indeed *true* that someone gave you a quote, but it is not the journalist's job to report that someone spoke. It is your job to report *what* they said. If what they said is true, print it. If not, don't." If you can't find out whether it's true or not, don't print it, because if it turns out to be false, you will have made a mistake. If what they said is false and damaging, you will be sued for libel. More on that later in the book.
3. Never steer your story. In other words, don't come to a conclusion about your story and then cherry pick facts to fit your conclusion. That's not journalism, that's propaganda, or spin. At Andover, the students are very fond of the staff workers in the dining hall. Many of the staff speak Spanish, and the students enjoy chatting with them in Spanish as the staff make their stir fry. There's something nourishing for both the staff and the students when they interact this way, something more than lunch that passes between them. It's friendship, or something like it; it's connection—a bridge between the world of working adults and the very lucky students they serve. Recently, the dining hall at Andover underwent a major renovation. Many of the staff who had previously been serving students in the stir fry line were now working backstage in the new dining hall's gleaming kitchens. The students missed the workers, and some students leaped to the conclusion that after the renovation, new fancy chefs were brought in—mostly white men the students hadn't ever seen before—while the Spanish-

speaking workers were relegated to lousy kitchen jobs. Editors at the school newspaper got wind of this and sent their reporters out to “get” the story that the new dining hall’s policies included demotions based on the staff’s ethnicity. Except the story wasn’t there, because the Spanish speaking staff, like all the staff, both new and old, had been invited to choose the tasks they’d like to perform in the new dining hall and were trained in those tasks. Some of the staff who were once in the stir fry line didn’t want to continue in stir fry—they preferred to work in catering, or in set up or clean up or food preparation. All the students had to do was *ask* them where they worked now and why, and the staff would’ve told them. The newspaper’s story focused primarily on the superficial count of Hispanic workers who were no longer out front serving students but were now invisible in the kitchen. The numbers were right, the facts were right, but the numbers carried implications of a policy, a vaguely racist policy, that didn’t exist. The story had been gummed together with facts chosen to create the impression the editors wanted to convey—not the story that actually existed.

Remember that when you are a reporter, you gather bits and pieces of information from here and there, and you wave a wand until (presto!) it becomes a little white dove that flies away on its little wings. Except, actually, you don’t wave a wand, and there is no presto! Instead, you piece together the story as well as you can, using lots of information from lots of sources combined with your judgment. And then you must ask yourself: Have you got it right? Did you make a dove? Or is it a crow? Does it have wings and feathers? Or did you patch together some unsightly thing that actually can’t even fly? A journalist’s work is difficult and can be subtle. You aren’t simply describing the surface of things, like someone capturing a moment with a camera; you aren’t simply giving your version of events, like someone writing an opinion blog. You are answering to a more complex requirement—you are being true to the story. You

can't steer it or dig up facts to fit into it. Instead, you must gather many facts and see what they honestly add up to. Then presto. You can write your story.

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## Reporting

*“The three most important words in journalism: accuracy, accuracy, accuracy.”* – Attributed to [Joseph Pulitzer](#)

Here's how to report a story:

## Formulate an Angle

When you come up with a story idea, or when your editor assigns one, you must figure out what aspect of the story you'll focus on. That's called the **angle**. So if a massive fire breaks out at a polar fleece factory in your city, for example, you might be assigned to cover the fire itself in a news story that includes how it started, how it grew out of control, and how it was fought. Another reporter might cover the story from a different angle, perhaps reporting on how much damage was done, how the polar fleece industry will be affected, and how the closing will lead to local unemployment woes.

The next day, you could do a folo news story on the fire itself, with the latest information on exactly what happened. Or you could write a feature story on how the employees are coping with their livelihood having gone up in flames, or a feature about polar fleece itself—how it's made, why it's so warm and soft, how everyone loves to walk and hike and grocery shop in it, how quickly it has become a hugely important textile. A month later you could take up the

subject again in a folo feature story to see if the factory’s running yet, and if not, what’s going on with the workers. These are all different angles for writing about one fire.

The most important angle of every story: people. Who are they? How does this story affect them?

The angle of a hard news story is usually straightforward and dictated by events. Your task is to find out what happened at a certain time and place, and to answer all the W and H questions: what happened, where, when, how, who is involved, why it matters. And rest assured, figuring out why it matters does not mean you are interpreting events. On the contrary, it means you are making sense of the facts you’ve gathered.

The definition of a hard news story is a “response to an event,” and the angle is generally fairly straightforward: this just happened. A feature story, by contrast, is defined as a “response to an idea,” so the angle is dictated only by the reporter’s or editor’s creativity. Some people can rattle off feature ideas non-stop; others struggle to come up with angles that aren’t oversimplified or cliché. One of my favorite journalism teachers in all the land is [Melissa Wantz](#), from Foothill Technology High School in Ventura, California—where she also advises [The Foothill Dragon Press](#). Among her brilliant creations is the following brainstorm guide, to help you come up with story ideas:

## Story Brainstorming Tips by Melissa Wantz<sup>[1]</sup>

- Do not ask: “What are some good story ideas?” or “How do I find story ideas?”
- Instead ask:
  - What big-ticket item am I going to buy soon? Chances are others may be, too, and a little research can yield good

consumer reporting.

- What have I been worrying about lately?
  - What has made me angry lately?
  - Whom would I like to know more about?
  - What do I wish I knew more about?
  - What was the last thing I looked up online?
- Skeptical? A veteran journalism adviser says this: “‘What has made me angry lately?’ I once had a student laughingly say, ‘I’m mad at my sister because she wore my sweater today without asking, but that’s not a story.’ Oh, yeah? The staff brainstormed a bit and ended up with one about dealing with siblings without fighting, complete with a great interview with a local family therapist. Another time, a freshman was angry about having to pay adult rate at the movies but [not being able to] get into an R-rated show he wanted to see. That became a good feature on how the local theaters choose movies and what ratings have to do with it.”
  - Sometimes, it takes a little work—brainstorming, narrowing the focus, broadening the scope, thinking of ways to localize, and finding good local primary sources to interview—but it’s always worked.

## Identify the Stakeholders

**Stakeholders** in a story are the people—or governments, businesses, or organizations—with a significant interest in the story, who are in some way involved with or affected by it. Often, the stakeholders in a story are obvious, but sometimes, figuring out who they are takes a bit of legwork itself.

Once you make a list of stakeholders, make a real effort to interview them. It is lousy work to write that so-and-so—who is

important to your story and who will care very much what it says—“could not be reached for comment.” Reach people. If the residents of a housing complex accuse their landlord of gross neglect, you need to talk to the landlord. If 500 people spent the night on the floor of Logan airport after their flights were canceled by Air France, you really have to call Air France. If a third grade class, inspired by Brangelina, collected a bazillion pennies to send to an impoverished school in Africa, put Brad and Angelina right on your stakeholder list. You might not reach them for an interview, but if you want a decent story, you had better call their agent and at least give it a try. Indeed, you must always pursue the stakeholders and never shy away just because they’re busy or famous or, for that matter, scary. Even if you know a stakeholder is likely to blow your head off in a shrieking tirade, you owe the maniac a call.

Note: Keep in mind that stakeholders by definition have an interest in your story and therefore likely also have a bias. If you ask them for more than just a comment—if you ask them for information—then you’re asking them to be your sources. And just as you would with any other source, you must evaluate their credibility and reliability. You do this by thinking through why they are talking to you, what they have to gain, or what they risk. This will help you figure out what their bias may be, so you aren’t manipulated or deceived.

Now, consider a moment in history when the American media *was* manipulated by a single stakeholder—the U.S. government. Watch the beginning of [Buying the War](#), a PBS documentary about the compliant press in the lead-up to the Iraq War.



Beware of becoming manipulated into serving as the mouthpiece of certain stakeholders in your story.

## Gather Information from Sources

## Legwork

Your first source should be, of course, yourself, as you go tearing out the door to unearth the story. There is no substitute for being there at the scene of a story and seeing things with your own eyes. This is how you get the facts right, and this is how you get the atmospheric that make a story come alive.

But before you fling yourself out there, you need to understand that journalists, like all other citizens, must follow the law. Journalists may go to public places—but not to private places—without permission. They may listen to a conversation in the street and report it, but they may not tape that conversation without the speakers’ consent; they may go to a crime scene, but they may not necessarily be allowed past the yellow tape (note the phrase “not necessarily”). Journalists do have the right to be at a crime scene, but they can’t impede rescue attempts or put themselves or others in danger. For a full list of your rights as a journalist, read and keep as a reference this Student Media Guide to News Gathering from the Student Press Law Center (SPLC), a non-profit organization devoted to the protection of scholastic press rights.



Reporters interviewing an officer at a crime scene from outside the yellow tape.

## Documents

Documents are great sources because they're usually straight with you: once you copy them or take their picture, you've got what you need. Of course they can be forged or doctored, but unless you think a stakeholder would resort to that, you can assume a document is a reliable source. The trick for success with documents is knowing which ones exist and which of those are legally available to the press. The Society of Professional Journalists has compiled an extensive list of public documents, called "[The Journalist's Toolbox: Public Records Archives](#)" for you to examine.

If your request for a public document is denied, don't be stopped in your tracks. Keep reporting by submitting a request for the document under the [Freedom of Information Act](#). In the old days, submitting a request under FOI took forever! Journalists were on endless hold, waiting for the government to supply information that sometimes took weeks and months and, truth be told, years to be released. But the process is far more streamlined now, and FOI requests truly work.

## The Media

Another source of information for reporters is the media itself. No newspaper wants to get its information secondhand, but neither can any newspaper afford to have a correspondent everywhere. Thus

newspapers pay for subscriptions to wire services such as [AP](#), [UPI](#), and [Reuters](#). They also rely on reports from other newspapers and from television and the web. Good newspapers will independently verify information from other media sources, especially when the information is breaking news. Never forget that it is quite easy to get information from other media that turns out to be untrue.

## People

Most of the time, your sources will be people, and the way you approach them and engage with them will make all the difference in how well you do your job. When I am in the car with my kid, and a great song comes on, she often says, “Will you stop singing? And—(she sighs)—stop moving your head.” So, this is one method of communicating with me. Later in the day, the same child will sidle up to and say, “Ma...mee... (smile, snuggle) Can I take the car?” So in the morning, this child is a bit cranky, while in the afternoon, she is a sweet angel, and it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that in the afternoon, she wants something from me.

And you are going to want something from your sources—information—and therefore you are going to be very charming with them, as well you should be. But you also need to be professional with your sources and absolutely straight with them, so you do not mislead them or put yourself in a position to be misled.

## Set the Ground Rules

When you meet sources, tell them *right away* you’re a reporter for

a newspaper so that they don't start talking before they know who you are and what you're doing. And if you call them on the phone, also tell them right away who you are, and that you're putting together a story and want to speak to them about it. Ask if they mind your asking a few questions.

Then establish whether you are talking on the record, off the record, or not for attribution. Be aware that these terms mean different things to different people, so be sure you get the ground rules straight with your source before you start asking questions.

- **On the record** – This means you will print what they say and use their name.
- **Not for attribution** – This means you will print what they say, but you won't use their name. This can be dangerous, as you must protect their identity.
- **Off the record/On background** – This means you are seeking to be informed about a situation. You won't use direct quotes or the source's name. You'll use the information to get more information from another source.

Remember that ethically, it is your responsibility to protect your sources based on the arrangement you made together. If you agree not to name them in your story, then you can't reveal who they are to anyone—except, perhaps, your editor, who may demand to know, depending on how serious the story is and how much he trusts your ability to evaluate sources. If you go ahead with an anonymous source, and the story provokes a court case, you will face a dilemma. If a judge orders you to name your source, you'll either have to do so or risk being put in jail for contempt. This is what happened in the case of Judith Miller (who revealed in her news story the name of an undercover CIA operative) and her source Scooter Libby (the White House official who leaked the name to her), and it raises very difficult questions about whether journalists should have special protection under the law to pursue their work. Should reporters be shielded from the courts' requiring them to name their sources?

In fact our justice system recognizes that journalists may have a claim to special protection under the law because they have a special job to do on behalf of the people as they go about gathering facts and information for their stories. These are called shield laws or reporter's privilege, and they vary state by state: you can look up your state at the previous link.

To see a terrific documentary on the case of Judith Miller and Scooter Libby, you should watch this special on PBS's Frontline, titled [News War](#).

## Conduct the Interview

Here is the first rule of interviewing: The source should be talking, and you should be taking notes.

This seems self-evident, but it's surprisingly easy to forget. The source, after all, is someone else, while you are you, the epicenter of the universe as you know it, the one who's come up with clever questions, the one who'll have a byline, the one who, frankly, has gained so much knowledge while preparing for this interview that the interviewee is going to be mightily impressed if he'd just shut up and listen. But he's not supposed to be listening, he's supposed to be talking, and even if you know the answers to your clever questions, you're not the one who should answer them. If you simply can't put yourself in such a powerless position, remember that once the interview's over, it's your show again and your story. How well you stifled your ego during the interview may well determine how well your story turns out in the end. What you want to do is get the source talking.

You should prepare for the interview by writing down your questions and reading them to yourself several times before you meet your source. If you're looking strictly for information for a

hard news story, then ask your questions and keep asking until you receive solid answers. (Note the superb interviewing techniques on display in [News War](#) by *Frontline* correspondent Lowell Bergman.) Try to not let the source get away with generalizations or evasions. If you want to know how much money your city is spending on a new park, you should get a number for an answer, not a disquisition on the benefits of greenery. Before you head back to the newsroom, check your written list of questions and be sure you asked them all. Also be sure you have the source's name spelled correctly and an email or phone number so that you can contact him again should you realize, in the middle of writing your story on deadline, that you've forgotten a crucial fact (not that this has happened to me, ever).

If you're working on a feature story, you don't want to grill your source—you want to have what feels like a conversation. Ask a few questions from your list, and then stop thinking about the list and, instead, just listen closely to what your source is saying. Pay attention to her mood and body language, get a sense of how she feels, and ask your follow-up questions based on what she's saying. Before you say goodbye, go back and look at the list of questions you wrote up in advance. Chances are you will have asked them all because you looked them over carefully before the interview started, so they were on your mind and thus you likely found a way to bring them into the “conversation.”

The second rule of interviewing is this: Get details, details, details.

A kid wearing a white shirt and slacks to his after-school job as a janitor is less interesting than a kid wearing a white shirt and slacks his mom ironed that morning. Details, details, details. And write them down or you'll forget them. Use five spiral notebooks, if you must.

Here's the third rule: Take notes.

If you meet a source in person, take notes in one of those cool reporter's notebooks, and you might want to use your cell phone to record the conversation as well, but only if you ask the source for permission to use it; it's illegal to tape someone without her

permission. If you talk to a source on the phone, write or type as you listen. You can also tape the conversation, to be sure you have the quotes down properly, but, again, only if the source gives you permission.



A journalist taking notes in a reporter's notebook and making use of a tape recorder during an interview with a source.

Try to get the source's words down exactly so you'll have direct quotes in your notebook, and if you can't write as fast as he's talking, ask him to repeat what he said. If you get the direct quote, put quotation marks around it. If your source says something's off the record, write "OFF" beside it. Be sure you're careful with these things so you don't get back to the newsroom and find you can't decipher which words are the source's and which are yours, and which ones were off the record. That would be a stomach-sinking kind of moment for you, especially if the source is now on a plane to Shanghai and unable to help you sort through your mess.

## Verify Your Information

“The three most important words in journalism: accuracy, accuracy, accuracy.” So said Joseph Pulitzer, and since you have already read a whole section in this book about the cost to a society of mistakes in a newspaper, you don’t need a big explanation here. Just remember that after you gather information for your story, you need to “stand the story up,” which is newspaper lingo for saying that you need to be sure everything in your story is right. How do you do that? More legwork. More going to the hockey rink.

No, I’m kidding. You might not need to go back there. Plus, you’ll never find a parking spot. So you can do a lot of this work from your desk. But you *do* need to do it—you need to retrace your steps—because you are only human, and it’s possible you made a tiny mistake, such as writing “OFF” in the middle of a notebook page filled with quotations and then later, having suffered a cramp in your hand or maybe a brain cramp, you wrote “OTR” and now have no idea what you were trying to tell yourself. OFF the record again? ON the record now? Or *what*? Not that this has happened to me. But in the heat of reporting a story, you get cranked up and busy, with an editor looming over your shoulder, and it becomes easier than you might think to make an honest mistake.

Furthermore, even without the pressure of a deadline, it’s easier than you might think to make a dishonest mistake—that is, a mistake that’s not really a mistake but actually your character coming unglued. This happens, for example, when you must call a stakeholder in a story, not a really important character but one who deserves a call, and whom you really do *not* want to talk to, so you procrastinate until you’re sure the guy won’t be in his office anymore, and his home phone’s unlisted. This sort of lame maneuver is not going to work, by the way—I’m only guessing here—because the editor from hell will tell you to reach the guy at home. And you’ll say the number’s unlisted and he won’t even say one word. He will look you square in the eye. And off you’ll have to drive, fast, to the

guy's house, and if he's not home you'll have to find out where he is, etc., etc. And now you really *are* on deadline.

But getting back to the point here: Before you give your article to the editor, you must be sure everything in the story is right—people's names are spelled correctly, the budget numbers are accurate, the information you received from one source has been verified by a second source, quotations are attributed to the people who said them and they've been transcribed accurately from your notebook to your computer screen, etc. and so on—until every piece of material in your story stands up. The best way to do this, I think, is to follow this accuracy checklist from David Yarnold, executive editor of the [San Jose Mercury News](#):

## Accuracy Checklist from the San Jose Mercury News

- Is the lead of the story sufficiently supported?
- Has someone double-checked, called, or visited all the phone numbers, addresses, or web addresses in the story? What about the names and titles?
- Is the background material required to understand the story complete?
- Are all the stakeholders in the story identified, and have representatives from that side been contacted and given a choice to talk?
- Does the story pick sides or make subtle value judgments? Will some people like this story more than they should?
- Is something missing?
- Are all the quotes accurate and properly attributed, and do they capture what the person really meant?

After you have done all of this, you may send your article to the editor. He will read it, frowning. He will then call you over to say, “This is wrong,” about some small thing, and he will be right. He will not be smiling. Or else your story will be perfect! And he will not say one word.

### Exercises

1. Deconstruct a story in order to re-trace the reporter’s steps and determine what information he or she received from what sources. Select an article and read it carefully. In 10 words or less, describe the angle. Make a list of the stakeholders. Underline each attribution. (You should find that nearly every piece of information and every quotation is accompanied by an attribution.) Identify information that is *not* attributed, and determine the source of information and why the passage does not require attribution. (A reporter doesn’t need to provide attribution for information that is common knowledge or that he or she saw firsthand.)
2. Can you go there? Before you set out to report a story, you need to know where the press is legally allowed to go. You shouldn’t be intimidated by people who don’t want you around, but you also shouldn’t break the law or endanger anyone. (If you didn’t take a careful look at the SPLC’s Student Media Guide to News Gathering as you were reading above, now is the time.) Explain how you would go about covering a story at the following places:
  - A public school board meeting
  - A restaurant downtown
  - The scene of a car accident
  - An amusement park
  - Your local mall (pick an actual mall and do your research!)
  - Your school
3. A tiger that escaped from a local zoo has been caught and

returned to its cage. What is your angle? Who are the stakeholders? Who should be your sources? What questions will you ask? What is your bias? How do you keep it out of your story?

4. The director of a popular charity in your city has just been arrested, charged with stealing funds from the charity. What is your angle? Who are the stakeholders? Who should be your sources? What questions will you ask? What is your bias? How do you keep it out of your story? What court records are available to you? How about records from the charity?

# 8. Chapter 8: Interviewing a source: Tips

## Interviewing a source: Tips

The basics of preparing, conducting, and editing an interview; with special emphasis on public officials and expert sources.

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By [Christopher B. Daly](#) and [Leighton Walter Kille](#)

Interviews may be conversational, but they are not casual conversations. Organization is essential, as is attention to detail and a firm will. The process also begins well before you talk with the other person, be it face to face, on the telephone or over the Internet. The intensity of your preparations may vary depending on the gravity and importance of the interview.

The first thing to determine is your goals: Do you want to obtain specific information? If so, what? Even if you're working on a long-term project and are just interested in "learning more," do your best to determine what you'd like to learn. Based on your goals, compile a list of questions you'd like to ask. They can be highly specific ("What were you doing at noon on June 12, 2003?") or general in nature ("Tell me about your work"), as required. Err on the side of more questions rather than fewer, and prioritize them as you go.

Ensure that your list also includes the most basic questions: Is the interview on the record? Even if you know the subject's name (and presumably you do), you should always ask and confirm the spelling; if appropriate, get the name of his or her organization and title. If there's any other basic information you need for the article – say, if it's on young entrepreneurs born in your state, you'll need to ask his

or her birthplace and age – make sure those questions are on the list.

Once you've got your list of targeted questions ready, turn them into a list of general topics that you will have in front of you for the interview. Ultimately, it's better to work with a topics list rather than a series of carefully worded questions. You should strive to create a natural, though purposeful, conversation.

Gather the tools of the trade: voice or video recorder (make sure it's fully charged and tested; if you're really cautious, you can bring a backup unit), reporter's notebook, pen or pencil (always carry a backup), laptop. If the interview is taking place in person and you have business cards, bring some with you.

If you're having to deal with press officers or public relations people to arrange the interview, they may ask you for a list of topics you want to cover. While you can give them a general sense of topics, resist agreeing that you will stick only to those topics and definitely don't send the questions you've compiled. Reserve your right to ask any question that you deem relevant during the interview itself.

Do not let anyone get you to agree to have quotations approved before they are used in your story; it is not good journalistic practice and does not serve your audience in an honest way. This has become a important ethical issue in contemporary American journalism. For a sense of how such dynamics may play out, read "[Latest Word on the Campaign Trail? I Take It Back.](#)" in the *New York Times*.

### **Good practices during the interview**

First off, regardless of the situation, state that you are a journalist. It is unethical to fool or mislead people. You should also indicate that you are planning to publish or broadcast material from the interview, even if you are freelance and don't yet know where or how it will be published. (For student journalists, if you are going to put the article anywhere – including a blog – you should explain that it may be seen publicly.)

If at all possible, arrange to conduct the interview at the subject's

home or workplace (whichever is more appropriate). That places them in a target-rich environment, which greatly increases the chances that you will be able to meet people and see things that you would never get otherwise. In any case, find a quiet location to talk. Ask permission to record the interview and be sure to mute your mobile phone, particularly if you're using it as your recording device. Leave it up to the person you're interviewing to do the same, however.

If you are recording the interview, remember that some people may not say as much on tape – especially if it's the first time you've sat down together. Also, public officials may ask to be able to speak “on background” (meaning you can use the information, but without specific attribution) or even “off the record” (information that cannot be used). Establish the rules at the beginning of the interview. If you agree that an interview is all on the record, do not let the subject declare afterwards that something is off the record. At the same time, understand that you may be in a negotiation, and keep in mind what best serves the public interest.

When the time comes to record, start your device and put it on the table closer to your source than you (it's his or her words that are important, after all) but ideally in a position that allows you to see the timer.

First get the basic information (name, title and so on), then begin your list of questions. All people are different, of course, and some will talk without end while others barely speak. It can help to start with open-ended questions (“So, tell me about your childhood”) rather than ones to which the subject can give a yes/no answer (“Was your childhood happy?”). Allowing your subject to talk a length early can help put them at ease and open up mutual communication.

As things continue, remember that as a journalist, it's your job to control the flow of the interview, asking the questions and keeping things on track. That doesn't mean you can't let the topic of discussion move in unexpected ways – indeed, this can sometimes be to your advantage – but make sure you get what you came for. If

an important question is sidestepped, ask again. If the interviewee seems to become angry or upset, stay calm and ask the question in another way. If responses go off track or go on too long, gently steer the subject back in the right direction. Be polite and respectful, but also firm.

As the interview proceeds, take careful notes, but don't allow it to become distracting. If something is said of particular interest, it's helpful to jot down the time in the interview when it occurred – this will greatly speed finding and verifying the quote after the fact. If your source mentions the name of a person, organization or place, ask for confirmation of the spelling.

At the conclusion of the interview, thank the interviewee for his or her time and ask if you can be in contact again if there are additional questions; ask for a cell phone number and direct email if you don't already have them, as they can provide a quicker path to a response. Also ask for access to photos and any other documents or objects that have come up. It will be much harder to do this hours or days later.

### **Maximizing your material**

Now that you have the interview, what you do with it depends on how it's going to be used. If you only need a few quotes, you can jump to those points in the recording based on the times you jotted down. If you're doing an extended printed Q&A – your questions and their responses – it's best to do a complete transcription and edit that down (of course making clear to your audience if it has been edited for brevity and clarity.)

In editing the interview, remember that people rarely speak in perfect, well-formed sentences. There will be many an “uh” and “ah” that can be safely omitted, assuming that this does not distort meaning. While you can trim the beginning or end of responses without having to indicate with ellipses, if you cut out a sentence or phrase in the middle, they should be used. Similarly, if you insert text for clarity, use brackets. Extensive information on the use of punctuation in quotes is available in [The Chicago Manual of Style](#).

If you have interviewed a public official, do not, under any

circumstances, allow him or her to modify answers that are already on the record. But some reporters will read back sections of stories and ask if there's anything he or she might like to add. However, it's a reporter's role to decide whether or not to use additional information, not the person interviewed. When dealing with private citizens, take particular care in cases where identities, locations and other identifying elements may be sensitive and could expose persons to danger or unneeded distress. Use your judgment about how a sensitive quotation from a private citizen – particularly those who have no media sophistication – needs to be used, and what information and context best serves the public interest.

**Special cases: The need for more homework**

If the interviewee is someone whom you are seeking out because of his or her particular position or authoritative knowledge of a situation (the deputy transportation commissioner, the CFO of a company, etc.), you need to put in sufficient time researching previous news articles written about that person and other relevant background. Come informed – in many ways, a journalist is the one person in the community who represents only the public interest and whose job it is to give voice to collective concerns. It may be the only time an official has to be accountable for certain things, and it is in this way that journalists play a special role – with special responsibilities and burdens – in a democracy.

Another special case are experts whose views you seek to deepen a story. The same rule applies there: Prepare, prepare, prepare. The following are key things to keep in mind for these two special classes of sources:

***Academics and experts***

For research experts, don't just show up or call to "get a quote"; do enough reading of his or her materials that you show respect and can speak a little of the expert's professional language. Don't waste someone's time with factual questions that you should really know yourself. An example of a sub-par question would be asking a political scientist: "How many electoral votes does our state have?" An example of a good question might be: "What factors might

influence the vote in our state?” That doesn’t mean you can’t ask simple, direct questions; just ensure they aren’t things you could learn on your own perfectly easily.

Though it is not good professional practice to give questions in advance to sources such as public officials, with experts you may want to email some general questions before speaking on the phone or in person. Help them educate you. Most experts’ Web pages feature links to their work; for academics, also search [Google Scholar and other databases](#). Try to read any primary articles and research he or she has authored (at least be familiar with the subjects and extent) that directly relate to your subject of interest. For academic papers, try to at least read the introduction and conclusion, even if the methods section is [heavily statistical](#). Know that most papers, at their root, are simply trying to figure out the logical relationship between several variables and test a hypothesis – try not to be intimidated. If the research is what you’re interested in, email other academics cited in the paper and ask them what they think of the findings.

Greg Ip, the U.S. economics editor at *The Economist*, has [this to say](#) about interacting with experts: “If I don’t have a lot of experience in the area, I’ll ask, ‘Can you point me to some other things so I can get a better grounding before we can begin the interview?’ I find that academics are incredibly helpful and patient; they like to talk about their work, because they’re excited by it and publicity is usually good.... [But] one thing that I have learned about academics is that – even when they are not partisan or biased in the direction the research goes – I think it’s the nature of the discipline that academia rewards people who develop very strong views on often narrow subjects.”

Remember that many experts can be skeptical of journalists because of the media’s general tendency to oversimplify. Show them you know the subject matter and care enough to read in depth. By doing so, you may earn a trusted source who can help you in the future. You will almost certainly get better answers and fresh angles for further stories.

### **Public officials and newsmakers**

When interviewing public officials and people in the news, know the job that he or she does – what their powers, limits and constraints are. Also come to the interview with a sense of his or her agenda. Is the person simply a good public servant? Running for higher office? Wants to clear the record on some specific point? Good interviews with public officials are directed but conversational. Remember, too, that one reason people want to have a conversation with a reporter is to learn things they may not know. As a reporter, you talk to people in the community that officials and newsmakers don't. Many good interviews involve a two-way exchange in which both parties learn something. Don't give up your professional objectivity, but recognize that you are dealing with human beings who are often just as curious as you are.

Above all, educate yourself so that you do not walk into an interview unaware of some previous controversial public issue or high-profile accomplishment or failure that serves as important context. Once an official realizes your ignorance, it would be very easy for him or her to sidestep questions or give easy answers, if that's what he or she wants to do. You may want to do some advance background interviews with others – especially those who may disagree with your primary interview subject – about key areas of concern.

Review related coverage in your own publication's archives and those of other sources. Also dig through [Lexis-Nexis](#) or [Factiva](#); each differs in the kinds of articles and transcripts available, so try them all. If you need to search historical news, a good choice is [ProQuest](#). If you don't have access to these, contact your local libraries and ask for access to similar databases, such as those through [NewsBank](#). Note that a [Google News](#) search only yields recent articles; to see older related content, go to the drop-down menu on the right of the the search bar, and select "in archive" for the "Date added to Google News" option.

High-level persons typically have limited time in their schedule, so you'll want to plan your interview questions very carefully.

Remember that you can ask for things to be put on the record at the end of the interview or later on; and you can always ask if there is another way you can confirm information, such as a public record that says the same thing. As mentioned, some of the most useful things that you can come away with are documents, so ask if there are reports, spreadsheets, papers, transcripts, etc. that you can take or photocopy that might help your story. In the heat of an interview, it is not always easy to figure out what is important; but documents can be analyzed and studied afterward, when you have time to think.

If you are planning to ask difficult and uncomfortable questions, structure your questions so that the tougher ones come last, knowing that, sometimes, you may be asked to leave. And prepare to follow up even if things get tense. Maintain your composure. Frame the question so that it does not become a debate and consider triangulating so it does not become personal: For example, use the phrasing “Your critics have said... What do you say?”

Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Ron Suskind [advises reporters about interviews](#) as follows: “Be honest; and always say, ‘Please explain this to me in words so I can understand it.’ People live inside a lexicon. Lexicons often carry with them judgments. We’re very tribal.... Tribes develop language, and I am always wary of that. When I say, ‘Explain that to me in terms I can understand,’ then sources start to get more fundamental and elemental.”

For particular issues relating to business leaders, see the tip sheet [“Writing a Compelling Company or CEO Profile.”](#)

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# 9. Chapter 9: Human Sources and Rules For Quoting/Using Information

## NYU Journalism Handbook for Students

### [NYU Journalism Handbook for Students](#)

Ethics, Law and Good Practice

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#### **REVISED 2020**

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## HUMAN SOURCES

A human “source” is roughly defined as a person who contributes information to a piece of reportage, whether or not it is ultimately published or aired in any venue—print, the internet, radio (audio podcasts included), video on a news report on television, online, in a documentary film, or across a future medium we haven’t thought of yet.

Journalists should seek to be fair and truthful in reporting what their sources tell them. Factual accuracy entails checking, and double-checking, facts and fairness involves working diligently to get myriad sides of a story by speaking to multiple sources with different and often varying points of view. When appropriate, journalists should make a judicious attempt to balance “establishment” experts—spokespeople for think tanks, foundations, and the like—with knowledgeable sources from outside “official” culture. Fairness also means adhering to the “no surprises” rule when writing critically of someone: affording the source the opportunity to answer allegations or criticisms before publishing the work.

In addition, journalists should avoid engaging in stereotypes and, whenever possible and appropriate, make sure that people from different economic backgrounds, ethnic groups, religions and cultures are represented in the reporting. The NYU journalism faculty urges students to treat sources with respect. Never threaten punitive action against a source for a perceived lack of cooperation.

## QUOTES

The assumption is that every word in a quote is word for word what the interviewee said. Many news organizations—*The New York Times*, Associated Press—do not allow reporters to “clean up”

quotations, even if the speaker employs tortured syntax. In that case, it is often best to remove the quote and paraphrase the response—or just quote the words or phrase that are the strongest. It is permissible to delete extraneous sounds like “uh” or “um.”

## CARDINAL SINS

### PLAGIARISM

Journalists earn their living with words, and plagiarism—using someone else’s words as if they were your own—is, simply stated, stealing. It can take many forms. At its worst, plagiarism can be copying and pasting an article off the internet and slapping your own byline at the top. Or subtler: Lifting a quote from a wire service story or taking credit for another person’s idea.

Because of the internet, plagiarism is easier today than ever before; it’s also easier to catch. To avoid charges of plagiarism, a writer must paraphrase another’s words and state the source(s); credit another person’s ideas and theories; and cite any facts that are not commonly known. Be sure to label your notes carefully when consulting material in a library or online. It is possible to inadvertently plagiarize a work this way; if you do, you suffer the consequences nevertheless.

How to recognize acceptable paraphrasing vs. plagiarism

Original passage: “In 1938, near the end of a decade of monumental turmoil, the year’s number-one newsmaker was not Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Hitler, or Mussolini. It wasn’t Pope Pius XI, nor was it Lou Gehrig, Howard Hughes or Clark Gable. The subject of the most newspaper column inches in 1938 wasn’t even a person. It was an undersized, crooked-legged racehorse named Seabiscuit. (From *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*, by Laura Hillenbrand.)

The following is plagiarism:

“The biggest newsmaker in 1938—measured in newspaper column

inches—wasn't the president, nor was it Adolph Hitler or the pope. It wasn't Babe Ruth or any Hollywood actor either. Why, it wasn't even human. It was a racehorse named Seabiscuit.”

Why is this plagiarism? Because the writer has taken the spirit of Hillenbrand's passage and simply reordered a few sentences and substituted words—including a relatively obscure fact about more newspaper column inches being dedicated to Seabiscuit than any human in 1938. What's more, the writer didn't credit Hillenbrand's work.

Here is an acceptable paraphrase of this same passage:

“In 1938, the legendary racehorse Seabiscuit was so famous he accounted for more newspaper column inches than the president, pope and any Hollywood film star, according to Laura Hillenbrand in *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*.

Or simply, Seabiscuit was extremely popular in 1938. There's no need to cite Hillenbrand because this is a commonly known fact that cannot be reasonably disputed.

Here is another example:

Original passage: “Jaithirth ‘Jerry’ Rao was one of the first people I met in Bangalore—and I hadn't been with him for more than a few minutes at the Leela Palace hotel before he told me that he could handle my tax returns and any other accounting needs I had—from Bangalore. No thanks, I demurred. I already have an accountant in Chicago. Jerry just smiled. He was too polite to say it—that he may already be my accountant, or rather my accountant's accountant, thanks to the explosion in the outsourcing of tax preparation. ‘This is happening as we speak,’ said Rao, a native of Mumbai, formerly Bombay, whose Indian firm, Mphasis, has a team of Indian accountants able to do outsourced accounting work from any state in America and the federal government. ‘We have tied up with several small and medium-sized CPA firms in America.’” (From *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, by Thomas L. Friedman.)

The following is plagiarism:

“India has become a major player in outsourced accounting, and,

for all you know, someone in Bangalore might very well be crunching your tax returns—on behalf of your accountant. ‘This is happening as we speak,’ said Jaithirth Rao, whose firm, Mphasis, has ‘tied up with several small and medium-sized CPA firms in America.’”

It is unacceptable because the way it is written, it appears the writer interviewed Rao and got that original quote, when it originated in Thomas Friedman’s book.

Another example:

Original passage: “The stock market crashed on October 29, 1929, a Tuesday, the most disastrous session on Wall Street to date in a month of turmoil.” (*The Worst Hard Time*, by Timothy Egan.)

The following is not plagiarism: “The stock market crashed on Tuesday, October 29, 1929, following a month of economic jitters.”

It is acceptable because the day the stock market crashed, leading to the Great Depression, is a well-known fact.

Additional sticking points:

It can be tempting to lift highly technical passages (say, a description of BMW’s braking system or an in depth analysis of how Google’s search engine actually works). Don’t do it. Instead, find a way to describe these things in your own words. This also goes for company descriptions used in press releases. For example, HP describes itself as “a technology solutions provider to consumers, businesses and institutions globally.” You might describe it as “a seller of a broad range of technology products and services, including PCs, printers, and IT infrastructure.”

The bottom-line rule of attribution is: When in doubt, cite the source of your information. You can’t go wrong then.

### **FABRICATION**

Making up sources or information in an assignment is a serious ethical violation. In the real world, it could lead to immediate dismissal and the end of your career. In the late 1990s Stephen Glass created in part or whole cloth some two dozen stories he published in *The New Republic*, *Harpers* and *Rolling Stone*, which led to one of the biggest journalism scandals in history. Jayson Blair of *The New York Times* plagiarized and fabricated sources and material,

which became a huge embarrassment to the *Times*, which is still recovering. Both are out of the profession.

### **DOCTORING PHOTOS OR VIDEO**

It is not permissible to doctor or manipulate photos for the purpose of misleading, although it is all right to crop pictures or enhance clarity if blurry. With video it is OK to edit footage but not all right to alter subjects' appearance or likewise distort reality. Increasingly photo manipulation is being used as an explanatory technique: Putting George Bush's head onto a wrestler's body for satirical purposes, for example. This is acceptable only if there will be no confusion between the photo manipulation—satirical or otherwise—and reality.

### **FICTIONAL DEVICES**

Names, dates and places should never be altered in any story, even to protect a source's identity. If publishing those facts could lead to retribution against a source, or if compassion dictates omitting these facts from a story, they should simply be cut (with an explanation to the reader). Composites, which are characteristics and histories of multiple characters blended into one, should never be used.

### **ON THE RECORD, ON BACKGROUND, NOT FOR ATTRIBUTION, OFF THE RECORD, AND ON GUIDANCE**

These are prearranged agreements between a reporter and a source, which govern how specific information can be used. These deals must be agreed to beforehand, never after. A source can't say something then claim it was "off the record." That's too late. When dealing with individuals who are not experienced in talking with reporters, journalists should make sure ground rules and potential consequences are clear, and then perhaps offer leeway. Of course, if the information isn't integral to the story, a reporter can agree not to use it. If you talk to five journalists, you'll likely get five different definitions for these terms. That's why it's important that a reporter clarify the use of these terms with a source before making any agreements.

In general:

“On the record” means anything the source says can be reported, published, or aired. All conversations are assumed to be on the record unless the source expressly requests—and the reporter explicitly agrees—to go off the record beforehand. If the reporter agrees to change “on the record” to something else, the reporter should be sure to mark notes clearly so that it’s possible to see what’s on the record and what is not at a later date. Never rely on memory and always try to get back “on the record” as quickly as possible.

“On background” is a kind of limited license to print what the source gives you without using the source’s name. But most veteran reporters will not use “on background” information until they can verify it with other sources. People try to go “on background” when their information is very sensitive, which is to say, the information is likely to cause a stir. “On background” means the source’s name does not appear in the story. In effect it confers anonymity on your source, but allows you to work with the information the source has provided. Again, it’s best to consult your professor in these situations.

“Not for attribution” means that a reporter agrees not to identify a source by name. Identification is provided only by reference to the source’s job or position. That identification must be agreed upon by the reporter and the source, and is almost always given in a way that prevents readers from discovering the source’s specific identity. (There are rare exceptions—when dealing with diplomats and expressing a nation’s official views, for instance.) The reporter should make sure the attribution is accurate and should press the source to allow the attribution to be as specific as possible. For example, a reporter would want to attribute information to “a high-ranking official in the Justice Department,” rather than “a high-ranking law enforcement official,” if the source agrees beforehand.

“Off the record” restricts the reporter from using the information the source is about to deliver. The information is offered to explain or further a reporter’s understanding of a particular issue or event. (Various presidents have invited reporters to have dinner with the

understanding that no information from this meeting can ever be published.) But if the reporter can confirm the information with another source who doesn't insist on speaking off the record (whether that means the source agreed to talking on the record, on background, or not for attribution), the reporter can publish it.

The problem with the phrase “off the record” is that many people, reporters and the general public alike, misunderstand its precise meaning. These days many interviewees think “off the record” is largely synonymous with “on background” or “not for attribution.” There is so much murkiness about what “off the record” means that it is essential that the reporter and source agree on a definition before beginning an “off the record” portion of an interview. At the Carter Institute of Journalism, “off the record” means the information should not be used in the story unless the reporter can confirm it through another source. In general, it is best to avoid off the record conversations; another option might be to converse off the record and then try to convince the source to agree to waive the agreement. If a source declares part or all of an interview off the record after the fact, and this indicates a clear violation of predetermined ground rules, then best practice still requires the journalist to inform the source that they are using the information and give source the opportunity to comment while moving forward with publication.

“On guidance” is a source willing to provide information with no attribution or acknowledgement of existence, simply an individual willing to provide a reporter a road map she must independently follow. This is a safer term to use with sources than an anonymous source. The faculty urges students to avoid using unidentified sources whenever possible. In recent years, *The New York Times*, to name one media outlet, has come under fire for reporting stories largely based on anonymous government sources promulgating a particular point of view, and this practice undermined the *Times*' goal of covering news impartially—“without fear or favor,” in the words of its patriarch, Adolph Ochs. For instance, the paper's coverage of Los Alamos researcher Wen Ho Lee, who Clinton

Administration officials pegged as a spy by using cover of anonymity to leak their suspicions to *Times* reporters, and its coverage of Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction leading up to the Iraq War, seriously tainted the paper's reputation. Recently, there has been a rise in the use of anonymous sourcing at CNN, Politico, and Business Insider, among other news outlets, which has frequently resulted in errors or other forms of blowback. One recent example would be BuzzFeed's use of anonymous sourcing in a story that claimed Michael Cohen was instructed by Trump to lie to Robert Mueller, which proved embarrassing to BuzzFeed and served to bolster the Trump administration's claims that the liberal media is biased often wrong.

There are moments, however, when the only way to get a story is to offer anonymity to a source; such offers should be a last resort after repeated attempts to go on the record have failed and the student has received permission from their instructor. Some notable examples: a source admits committing a crime, and publishing their name could land them in prison; a source begs anonymity because public exposure could embarrass the source or jeopardize the source's job; an illegal immigrant is afraid to speak out for fear of being deported. In these cases, the student should consult with their professor. If an anonymous source must be used, the student should attempt to offer as much detail as possible about who the source was and explain the reason anonymity was given. For instance, identify a source as "a police detective close to the investigation who requested anonymity because their superiors had ordered them not to speak publicly on the matter."

Except in rare instances, a reporter should not publish an anonymous quote or statement from a source that is critical of another person. Generally speaking, if someone is unwilling to put their name to a critical statement about another person, the reporter shouldn't use it. In all cases where a source requests anonymity, the reporter must get the source's name and address and contact numbers and that information must be made available to the professor, who, in effect, serves as the student's editor.

## **IN-PERSON, PHONE, EMAIL, TEXT AND SOCIAL MEDIA DIRECT MESSAGE INTERVIEWS**

It is best to speak to sources in person. In-person interviews allow for colorful, descriptive reporting. Sources also tend to be much more relaxed—and perhaps more truthful—when interviewed in person. It’s also much easier for a reporter to gauge the credibility of a source when meeting face to face. But an in-person interview is not always practicable, and in those cases the telephone is the next best mode of communication. Be sure to check the veracity of a source’s identity by calling through corporate or government switchboards, and be suspicious if a source will only call you and will not provide either a phone number or an affiliation.

Email interviews can have their place. In certain circles—technology or in the world of online forums, for instance—many sources insist on email interviews so they have a written record of what is discussed. In addition, email interviews can serve as an effective way to further clarify information from a prior in-person or phone interview, especially if data and highly technical information is being conveyed. But email interviews can create problems, too. How does a reporter know the person replying is who they say they are? All too often, company publicists answer email questions on behalf of their bosses or clients. Email answers often tend to be carefully scripted and thus not truly representative of what the source truly thinks. Spontaneous answers in conversation are often more truthful. Follow-up questions—usually the most productive questions in a probing interview—are also very difficult and time-consuming to ask via email. Likewise, instant message interviews should not be used to replace in-person or telephone interviews, but at times can be useful in clarifying responses after an interview.

NYU Journalism faculty strongly urge student reporters to meet sources in person whenever possible. It makes for richer, better stories; the writer can describe physical settings—what a source’s office looks like, for example.

### **PERSON-ON-THE-STREET INTERVIEWS**

When interviewing people on the street—tourists, passersby, voters exiting a polling precinct—be sure to get proper contact information (telephone number is best; email less so) in the event an editor needs to confirm quotes or facts, check a source’s identity, or simply wants the reporter to ask follow up questions. Often the purpose of on-the-street interviews is to try to capture the diversity of opinion in a particular population, not just to get a few lively quotes to brighten a story. In this case, a reporter should make an effort to interview enough people so that they can feel reasonably confident the story holds a fair cross-section of opinion. Better still, a reporter should back up their interviews with statistically legitimate polling data if available. And reporters should always be honest with their readers about the number of sources interviewed. Don’t leave readers with the impression that your story accurately reflects campus opinion if you have only interviewed half-a-dozen people. Instead, tell readers how many people you interviewed, and attempt to quantify their views.

### **IMMERSION**

Immersion involves spending long periods of time with sources and sometimes in intimate settings—at home, with children, in hospitals or in times of crisis, to name several—as is often referred to as “fly on the wall.” As such, it involves a series of ethical considerations that are best negotiated explicitly with sources. As with every other form of journalism, we do not share written work with our sources on the page. We do not pay our sources, nor do we manipulate stories by creating scenarios or situations that we think will serve our work. By definition, our presence changes the course of events, however, and there are times when you as a journalist will face making tough ethical calls which may involve driving people places (especially to medical care), sleeping in their homes or eating meals with them. On a case by case basis, there will be times when contributing to the cost of your presence will be welcome and appropriate, but otherwise, the ethical principles related to immersion, despite the close and sustained contact, are consistent with all other forms of journalistic professionalism.

## **OBLIGATIONS TO SOURCES**

It is imperative that journalists honor their agreements with sources; some have taken great risks in providing information. If you agree to a source's request for anonymity be sure you don't inadvertently provide information in your story that could peg them as the source. Such deals should never be undertaken lightly. Reporters must carefully consider whether to guarantee anonymity to a source, especially involving a matter that could eventually go to court. Refusing to name a source in a legal proceeding could land a reporter in jail. (The legal ramifications raised by the need to protect sources is discussed in the section on law, below.)

## **SECURITY**

In the course of your reporting, it is critical that you protect your sources – especially if those sources are confidential. This is a principle that often comes under threat from governments, dictatorships, corporations or criminal actors.

People who want to get the information from a journalist or a source can access information via subpoena or legal warrant, interception of data via spy agencies, cyber attacks, surveillance of company-owned computers or phones and many other low-tech approaches. These threats vary between stories.

There is no single tool that will protect a reporter or source from all the threats they may face, and there's no one single that will make information totally secure. Many measures taken to achieve security mean causing inconvenience in other parts of your life or your source's life. You should be honest with your source that while you will do the best you can to protect them, there is no way to completely guarantee their safety or anonymity.

The following are some ways one can achieve digital security:

- Two-factor authentication: Always use this for email and social networks. Don't reuse passwords. Don't ignore notifications – keep your software up-to-date.
- Encryption: Encryption scrambles data from online traffic so it

cannot be easily by those who want to intercept the data and information. Most internet traffic is protected with encryption (you can tell when you see the lock next to the web address in your browser). An extra-secure level of encryption when you're contacting a source via direct message is end-to-end encryption. This ensures that only the sender and the recipient of the message can read it – while the app that you're using cannot. End-to-end encrypted messaging apps include WhatsApp and Signal.

- Being aware of logging: A log is the digital record of old conversations or emails. Anything available to you via logging (e.g. old texts or emails) could be available to others by hacking, interception or legal avenues. It is important to be aware of what you keep logged and how often you delete your records. If you're part of a company, it's good to check your organization's policies about this as well. It's also important to be aware by other sites used by you or your source (e.g. Google doesn't delete emails until nine weeks after you hit delete).
- Being aware of metadata: Metadata doesn't expose the content of communications between you and a source, but it will expose the fact that you're in communication with that source. Methods of working around this include: reaching out to other people who may also have your source's information so that your source is hidden in a crowd; using throwaway phone or emails or communicating offline.
- VPN: VPNs send Internet data to and from your computer through a server elsewhere on the Internet, which means that you'll appear to be accessing the internet from your VPN server, which can be based anywhere in the world – not your actual location. A VPN will secure all your communications from local interception. VPNs are often used to circumvent Internet restrictions or government surveillance.

- Tor: Tor protects network traffic by encrypting and shuffling the data through several servers before entering the internet. Like VPNs, Tor also helps you avoid tracking or surveillance.
- Airgapping: For stories dealing with sophisticated actors (e.g. spy agencies, Russia, China) there is the chance that any computer that has been connected to the internet could be compromised by a hacking attack. To counter this, one can purchase an airgapped computer – one that has never been connected to the internet, that may have its network capabilities disabled. You can view documents safely on an airgapped computer because someone trying to access this information would need physical access to the computer to get at it.

Even after you publish a story, it is still vital for you to protect the identity of your source and look out for threats that could lead to the disclosure of your source's identity. Factors that could lead to source identification include:

- Misuse and misunderstanding of technology
- Human nature
- Legal errors
- Leaked and reused passwords
- Malware, social engineering or large-scale cyber attacks
- Identifying the source from published documents
- Other people who knew the source had the information

Before you publish or engage with a source, it's important to threat model and analyze the risks of using a source – what they have done, how capable are they to protect themselves and how likely they are to face retaliation. It's important to consider the following questions:

- Who would be interested in finding the source or stopping the publication of a story?

- How sophisticated are those people and what materials do they have at their disposal to stop the publication of a story?
- How sophisticated is the source? Will they be able to protect themselves?
- How much danger is the source in?

Through considering these questions, you should be able to communicate with your source to come up with the best plan to protect them and effectively deliver their information to the public.

### **EMBARGOES**

Under the terms of a media embargo, companies, government agencies, and scientific journals, among other organizations, provide advance access to material that they consider newsworthy to journalists who agree not to publish anything about that material until a set date.

Proponents of embargoes say that they level the playing field, and allow reporters time to develop fuller stories, rather than rushing to beat the competition. Some reporters like them because they can have at least some control over their schedules.

However, [embargoes](#) have become [overused in some fields](#), and often seem designed to create buzz around an event that would not seem newsworthy were it not for journalists' addiction to news pegs. That is particularly true in science and medical journalism, in which prominent weekly journals attempt to use their publishing schedules to dictate what's "news," even though research findings do not happen on a weekly schedule.

It would be good for the unfettered flow of information if journalists eschewed embargoes. Unfortunately, in some fields, reporting on breaking news has become difficult without agreeing to them.

If you decide to agree to embargoes, it is important to keep in mind that they are agreements, and can't be imposed unilaterally. A press officer can't simply send material and call it embargoed; you would be in your rights to report on that immediately.

It is also best not to agree to any conditions on embargoes other

than publication time. Recently, some government agencies and companies have used “[close-hold](#)” embargoes that require reporters not to discuss the embargoed material with any sources before the embargo lifts. That turns journalists who want to publish when the embargo lifts into stenographers.

Whenever agreeing to an embargo, it is good to think about who benefits and how. Even seemingly benign embargo agreements can be used by corporate, government, or other powerful interests to influence press coverage.

### **SEXUAL (AND NON-SEXUAL) HARASSMENT AND ABUSE**

In the course of your work, you may get harassed or abused by colleagues, sources, superiors or others both in the newsroom and far afield.. Harassment or abuse is often sexual – which includes unwelcome attention or sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and/or offensive remarks about a person’s gender. Harassment can come from sources, coworkers or people adjacent to your work.

It’s important to cover strategies to preemptively avoid harassment and abuse and how to deal with it once it has happened, but the responsibility always lies with the person perpetuating the harassment or abuse. It is never your fault if you are being harassed or abused. Don’t harass or abuse other people. If you are in a position where you witness harassment or abuse happening to someone else and you feel like you can *safely* speak up about the problem, you need to do so – even if it is uncomfortable for you. This can be accomplished by talking with the perpetrator directly, talking to someone who has the power to make the perpetrator stop their behavior, or even providing a temporary distraction to end the perpetrator’s behavior in that specific moment.

Some strategies to mitigate the risk of harassment include: meeting with sources in public places during times of day which fall inside professional boundaries (e.g. not meeting them at midnight for drinks.) Don’t meet alone or in remote locations with people who you aren’t familiar with – or if you have to, turn on a location-tracking app, alert your friends/colleagues, clearly keep in touch with other people and make sure the person you’re meeting with

knows that people would be concerned and proactive if you vanished off the grid. Choose clothing that befits the occasion. Set boundaries – clarify that your meeting with a person is strictly professional and if they cross the line, be immediately clear that it is unacceptable behavior. Tap into the whisper network, if you can locate one, to find out which sources/colleagues/etc are predatory.

If you are being harassed by a colleague or source, document the instances of harassment and share them with people so there is a record of what has been happening. The [Dart Center](#) suggests some strategies for dealing with harassment, including: directly telling them to stop, indirectly telling them to stop, ignoring the behavior, using humor and cutting an interview short.

If you have been harassed by someone, some options you could pursue are: sending them an email telling them that you'd like to keep them as a source, but only if they stop their behavior. (This also creates a paper trail). You could use an intermediary to approach them and tell them to stop. You could drop the source or report them to the company they work for (if they are affiliated with one). This all comes down to what you are comfortable with.

While harassment and abuse are wrong in every context, the different places in which you report may have different cultural standards for this type of behavior. This applies internationally, but these cultural differences also occur on a national level and are important to be aware of.

Some of these options may seem incredibly limiting – and they are, especially for women journalists, who often downplay harassment or abuse they receive because it would further limit their access to the important stories they're reporting. Sometimes, to get the story, you may *have* to meet up with a source for drinks at midnight or in a remote location or you may not be wearing a full professional suit. Sometimes, you may decide that pursuing the story is more important than harassment you may be receiving. At the end of the day, you know your story and yourself better than your editors, and you need to make the call with them on whether

something is safe for you or not. But remember, your safety is more important than any story.

### **WORKING INTERNATIONALLY**

Often the research required to be able to carry out reporting in an international location can exceed that needed to actually report the story. This is a key point to remember and take seriously throughout the entire process.

### **LAWS, VISAS, PERMITS, PASSPORTS**

First, it is essential to understand that laws that apply to journalistic activities within the United States do not extend outside its borders. Every country has its own rules and these must be understood to avoid difficult situations that might include arrest, detention or deportation. Generally, it can be observed that many countries have *more* restrictive laws than the US. In many nations, the mere act of reporting is something that is tightly controlled and cannot be conducted without permission from the government. While some cases are extreme, for example North Korea, where reporting is virtually impossible, many other countries including giants like China, Russia, Indonesia and India require specific journalist visas or reporting permits for foreign nationals. Many of the applications involve explaining what your story is about, so this can be a delicate process for investigative pieces. Some countries, like Vietnam, may require foreign journalists be accompanied by state appointed “minders”. Video and photography restrictions may exist in places where reporting alone might not be controlled (Morocco, Kenya). Prior research is essential in these matters to assure a successful and safe trip.

Reporters should be vigilant in keeping their passports up to date as many countries will not permit entry to anyone with a passport that expires within 6 months, something that can thwart an international assignment before it begins. Some entry stamps can cause issues when trying to enter other countries. For example, an Israel stamp will make it impossible to enter Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon, Sudan and others. An eagle-eyed passport control officer might even deny entry to a traveller with a Jordanian

entry stamp from the land crossing between Israel and Jordan. Non US citizens who benefit from the ESTA visa waiver program (many European and Northeast Asian citizens) will need an additional special waiver to enter the US if they have visited Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, Syria or Yemen. For several countries, proof of a Yellow Fever vaccination is required for entry – the “yellow card” is handed over together with the passport.

### **RISKS**

Red tape aside, reporting outside the United States can be a dangerous venture. According to data from the Committee to Protect Journalists, in 2018 alone, 54 journalists were murdered because of their occupation. Many of these cases involve covering conflict, but a survey of the past decade reveals a few hotspots even in non war-zones: 33 cases in Mexico, 25 in Brazil, 46 in the Philippines, 24 in India, 9 in Russia. The great majority of those killed were reporters working in their home nations, as opposed to foreigners, but international journalists are sometimes targeted and attacked as well.

Another rare but significant risk is that of kidnapping, sometimes at the hands of terror groups, sometimes rebel factions, and sometimes criminal gangs (often a combination of these). For assignments where this might be a concern, reporters should explore kidnapping and ransom (“K&R”) insurance, which can pay to free a covered person, depending on the level of the policy, and will usually provide high level intelligence, advice and negotiation services. Staff reporters should find out if their employer provides coverage and have all contact details handy and with their supervisor and family members. The costs of these policies can sometimes exceed the compensation of a foreign reporting assignment and therefore they are less often used by freelancers, though some commissioning media organizations do extend coverage to freelancers on assignment for them. Reporters from the US and UK (and possibly others) should be aware that their governments may offer only limited logistical support in cases of

kidnap and will *never* make ransom payments, even in high profile cases.

Even statistically more dangerous for border-crossing reporters are hazards stemming from the lack of infrastructure in many places around the world. Road accidents represent a significant risk everywhere, but fatality rates are 2-3 times higher in Liberia, Thailand or the Dominican Republic than in the US (which is itself higher than Canada, Mexico and many European nations). Because of this, many foreign reporters employ local drivers who are more accustomed to road and traffic conditions. Many reporters working abroad also adopt a policy of avoiding all road travel after dark.

Some international destinations may expose reporters to diseases not present at home, and the lack of well-staffed and -supplied medical facilities in many locations can complicate treatment for these or in cases of other illness or injury. First, location-specific medical advice should be sought before each assignment. Vaccinations and/or prophylaxis are available for some of these risks: for example malaria, typhoid and meningococcal meningitis. Reporters should always be sure to carry an adequate supply of any required medicines (which may not be obtainable locally) as well as insect repellent, sunscreen, altitude pills or other location-specific needs. Very few US health insurance providers provide coverage outside of the US and so specific travel medical policies, including adequate medical evacuation coverage for many destinations, should be a prerequisite.

Because of these hazards, it is always a good idea to develop a system to keep in regular contact with home base, so that in the event help is needed it is not needlessly delayed. Research should be carried out to see if a reporter's mobile phone provider offers adequate coverage in the destination country. If not, or if the cost is prohibitive, reporters should ensure their mobile device is unlocked and they should acquire a local SIM card on arrival. For some assignments, reporters should consider bringing a satellite phone or a GPS transponder, which can be used to send out location information when other communications are offline or unavailable

(although first make sure these devices are legal to import to the destination country. India, for example, strictly forbids satellite phones.). At a minimum, regularly scheduled “check ins” via phone, message or email should be arranged with a supervisor or even family member. These points of contacts should be furnished with emergency contact details for medical services, local embassies and crisis responders.

### **NYU RISK RESOURCES**

New York University has advanced and valuable resources available to mitigate some of these risks for enrolled students. International safety and security is handled by the Department of Public Safety’s Global Security Operations Center, or GSOC. The Center has advanced intelligence and crisis response capabilities and should be a first call should a student reporter find themselves in trouble while abroad on a university-related assignment. Its analysts are available for pre-trip consults and specific country risk assessments. They also have a limited number of first aid kits and satellite communications devices to lend out.

NYU’s Student Health Center maintains a travel health clinic which is available, by appointment, to do country specific health assessments and provide vaccinations and prescriptions for travel medications.

### **“FIXERS”**

Many journalists working outside of their home countries, whether on a short term assignment or on a more permanent basis, employ the services of local reporters, known as “fixers”. A journalism fixer is someone who, first and foremost, arranges and schedules access and interviews and navigates the bureaucracy that’s often a part of that. They may also work as translators when reporting is not conducted in a language the foreign reporter speaks well. Fixers can also be of tremendous benefit in assisting with logistics, from the visa and permit application process to finding hotels and drivers. Indeed, the fixer-foreign reporter relationship is the cornerstone of international reporting and establishing this association is often one of the first steps in undertaking foreign

reporting. Despite a recent proliferation of internet databases and Facebook groups, fixers are still usually referred by word of mouth by other reporters who have worked in a location.

Fixers are a reporter's first-line local expert and should be accorded respect for their understanding of local dynamics. But also be aware that sometimes fixers can bring with them local biases (or more often, the suspicion of bias). This can be especially acute in reporting on conflict where multiple sides need be explored but where a fixer has an identity tied to one side of the divide. Often the fixer is perfectly capable of remaining professional and neutral but will be rejected by a source because of fears of bias, or their presence will color the reporter's interaction with the source. Therefore there are occasions where it might be necessary to employ more than one fixer for an assignment. And, of course, foreign reporters should not make assumptions that a fixer will be safe in these situations simply because they are accompanying a neutral outsider.

Foreign reporters working in politically sensitive environments always need to be aware of and protect the safety and security of their fixers, as well as their sources. Retribution for a story that is considered by a party as negative to their position can be seen as easier to carry out against the fixer than the foreign journalist, who may appear to have greater protection. The foreign reporter may be safe outside the country when a sensitive investigative report is published but those who helped them compile the report are often not. The reporter must always make sure the fixer understands the nature of the reporting they are engaging in and what the outcome might be.

### **ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

Reporters must be especially careful with electronic correspondence and should explore whether use of advanced security and encryption is required to protect themselves, their fixers and their sources. Every country today uses some degree of electronic surveillance. Reporters should be especially cautious in their use of public (and even private) social media in telegraphing

their stories, or even their movements, to watchful governments. Politically (or religiously, or ethnically) charged statements on social media should always be avoided for reporters, but the hazards of this can be significantly elevated when dealing with adversarial regimes and may even be grounds for arrest in some places.

### **WORKING WITH INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

In reporting on natural disaster, crisis, conflict and human rights, especially in remote regions, the foreign reporter will often find themselves relying on help from multinational organizations like the United Nations (most often through its agencies UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM, WFP) or on non-governmental aid groups like the International Rescue Committee or Oxfam. While staying mindful of the principles discussed in this manual's Conflicts of Interest section, reporters should understand that accepting logistics assistance from these organizations in extreme circumstances is a generally accepted practice. Often the only way to reach a story, especially in conflict areas, is to get a seat on a World Food Program (UN) flight or with the European Union's humanitarian air service, ECHO. Sometimes the only place to stay at a remote feeding station where aid officials are responding to famine is inside a UN compound. Where possible, reporters should attempt to compensate organizations for these benefits, but often there is simply no mechanism for payment. Furthermore, most international organizations understand that enabling press coverage is indeed part of their mission and support is given without a *quid pro quo* expectation.

Where cooperation with these organizations can be more tricky is when reporters use them for introductions to interview subjects for stories. For example, a reporter might be introduced to an aid recipient by the group that provides that aid. This is again a common practice and may, in fact, foster a more healthy journalistic interaction in cases where the source is a victim of trauma (see below). At the same time the reporter should take extra care to assure that the source is properly representative of the situation on the ground, and not someone who only fulfills the narrative

of the organization making the introduction, no matter how well intentioned that group is.

### **WORKING WITH SENSITIVE POPULATIONS**

By no means exclusive to international reporting, nor a concern with all foreign reporting, but working with sensitive and traumatized populations requires extra care for both the reporter and their sources. Reporters should be especially careful not to re-traumatize victims, and should always work through trusted interlocutors when interviewing or otherwise covering victims of any kind of trauma. It is vital that the source understands the nature of the interaction, your coverage and what the possible outcome of the story might be. Reporters must also be aware of the risks of absorbing second hand trauma from what they are about to hear.

### **PAYING SOURCES (AGAIN)**

One last complicating factor that presents itself in international coverage is the question of compensation for participation. As stated earlier, and as a cornerstone of American press ethics, it is not acceptable to pay for interviews. However, in other reporting cultures, notably Japan and the UK, payment for interviews is normal and is therefore sometimes expected in places where reporters from these nations have worked. While the origin of this dynamic is understandable, it is never an excuse to violate this core principle.

### **TAPING CONVERSATIONS**

It is not always feasible to record conversations, and the transcribing process afterward can be quite time consuming. On the other hand, there are obvious benefits to recording interviews, especially important ones: namely an assurance of accuracy and the creation of a verifiable record. Although the laws of certain states allow professional reporters to tape conversations without getting the permission of the interviewee beforehand, some states don't. The Carter Institute of Journalism at NYU suggests that students first ask permission before taping any conversation to head off any potential legal entanglements. Begin the taping by stating the date,

time and asking the person to spell their name, which then offers proof the subject agreed to the taping.

In very rare instances, secret taping may be warranted. Reporters at the Lexington Herald-Leader won a Pulitzer in 1986 for their series, “Playing Above the Rules,” in which they secretly taped interviews with University of Kentucky basketball players, who told them a group of fans had violated NCAA rules by giving players cash and gifts. The reporters and editors were worried that sources would recant their stories under pressure, opening up the publication to potential litigation. If you believe secret taping is required to get the story, you must first seek your professor’s permission.

What follows is more detail on this topic:

I.) Taping (face to face): There are 37 states, plus the District of Columbia, that permit surreptitious recording of interviews. These are called one-party consent states, since only one party to the conversation—the reporter, for example—need give consent. (It is not, of course, legal to tape a conversation to which you are not a participant—by planting a bug or tapping a phone, for example.) On the other hand, 12 states have criminal statutes that prohibit recording without the consent of all parties to the conversation: California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Washington (Vermont has no law). Note that these are criminal statutes, the violation of which can bring a jail sentence, and these laws have been interpreted in various ways by the courts of each state.

II.) Taping over telephone: The same twelve states require consent of all parties in order to record a telephone conversation. Federal law permits the recording of phone conversations if one party consents and has been expanded to include wireless and cellular calls. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations conflict with federal statutory law—the FCC requires, for calls crossing state lines, that all parties be notified of the recording at the beginning of the call.

III.) Use of cameras without consent: Thirteen states forbid unauthorized use of cameras in private places: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, South Dakota, and Utah.

**REPORTING/VIDEOTAPING POST 9/11**

Although there is no law against videotaping a subway platform or police cars on patrol that doesn't mean you won't get hassled by law enforcement officials, who, after Sept. 11, have a heightened concern about terrorism. The City has even posted signs prohibiting photography on its bridges and tunnels. Although reporters may see a story in testing for security vulnerabilities, this can be particularly risky. The research would probably require a certain amount of subterfuge and may well involve a violation of criminal law. You can expect to be prosecuted, for example, if you test airport security by trying to smuggle a box cutter onboard a passenger jet. In addition, there are laws on the books that prohibit videotaping military installations and nuclear power plants.

# 10. Chapter 10: Research Materials & Copyright

## From NYU Journalism Handbook for Students

### [NYU Journalism Handbook for Students](#)

Ethics, Law and Good Practice

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## RESEARCH MATERIALS & COPYRIGHT

“Sources” may also be defined as research material, including newspapers, magazines, books, research reports, studies, polls, radio, television, newsreels, documentaries, movies, audio podcasts or video from the Web. All such sources, particularly secondary sources, should be carefully vetted. Good journalists don’t simply extract information, or claims, from written or broadcast material; they check that material against other or similar material for accuracy. Just because something is published doesn’t mean it’s accurate or fair. Wikipedia, for example, is not always an accurate source and should not be cited as such.

The reporter must clearly indicate where information comes from. Failure to disclose your reliance on someone else’s work is unethical, and can leave readers or viewers in the dark about the legitimacy of the information. This does not hold true if something is a well-known fact that is beyond reasonable dispute. For example, it would not be necessary to cite a source for “John Adams was the second president of the United States.”

### **FACT CHECKING INFORMATION**

Students should always check spelling, ages, job titles, company descriptions, and other facts before submitting stories. Nothing undermines a reporter’s credibility more than errors of fact. In addition, professors may ask students for sources’ contact information to verify information; students must provide that information upon request.

### **FAIR USE**

As a writer you can legally use a limited amount of copyrighted material for purposes of commentary and criticism, and parody, without first seeking permission. A book reviewer, for instance, may quote from the text they are reviewing; a film reviewer may outline the plot of a film to discuss whether the story holds together; a comedian may conjure up characters from a popular movie to be able to poke fun at it. Without the protection of fair use, copyright

holders could prevent negative reviews or parodies of their work from being published or broadcast.

Although you might not know if from the wild-west world of the Web, copyright laws, severely restrict the way other peoples' work can be used, even in news stories.

So, what expression owned by others can journalists quote (or very closely paraphrase)? Such expression includes articles, books, songs, movies and movie scripts, music, lyrics, plays, speeches, newsreels, documentaries, podcasts, TV programs, audio and video on the web, and other forms of expression. This question is mostly about copyright. And it's a legal question rather than an ethics question. (But, yes, there are some ethical matters that transcend law. For example, plagiarism is a grave ethical sin, but not all plagiarism is copyright infringement. Copyright law doesn't protect mere facts or ideas. To gain copyright protection, an author or songwriter or filmmaker or other creator has to make specific use of an idea or collection of facts. But appropriating somebody else's idea may amount to plagiarism.)

Not all expression is copyrighted. It may be very old (like "Moby Dick") or it may be government-produced (like a Supreme Court opinion). But if you're not sure, it's a good bet it's copyrighted. Federal copyright law, identified in the Constitution and spelled out a statute, is designed to protect creative expression by giving creators the right to profit from their creativity. As such, copyright law is a brake on the right of free expression set out in the First Amendment. But copyright law does allow "fair use" of copyrighted material. That's where journalists get some leeway in quoting copyrighted material.

But the area of copyright law is complicated and poses potential danger for journalists (and authors). Damages can be draconian, particularly if a court finds copyright infringement to be willful. And some books, for example (like a sequel to *Catcher in the Rye* and a parody of *The Cat in the Hat*), have been ordered off shelves by federal courts that ruled the books infringed on a copyright.

Copyright lawsuits notoriously turn on the specifics of individual

situations – broad generalizations are risky. But we can start with knocking down several misconceptions. Each of these is not a sufficient basis for quoting copyrighted material (or stated differently, is an insufficient defense if you're sued for copyright infringement):

- I fully credited the creator of the copyrighted material.
- It was really, really important to my story.
- I tried really hard to reach the owner of the copyrighted material (but failed).
- I tried really hard to persuade the owner of the copyrighted material (but failed).
- I didn't quote much.
- Lots of other journalists have quoted the copyrighted material.
- The copyrighted material was historical or of great historical significance.
- Even if I online have infringed someone's copyright, as long as I "take down" the infringing material when the copyright owner notifies me I'm immune from being sued.
- All I did was attend a Springsteen concert, videotape it with my iPhone, and upload it on YouTube so my friends could see.

All these factors may mitigate the damages you may be responsible for if you're successfully sued for copyright infringement. But the presence of these factors don't immunize you. Anyone who told you otherwise is wrong-o!

Whether your unauthorized quotation of copyrighted material constitutes fair use – and thereby protects you from liability if you're sued – comes down to four statutory factors: (1) the "purpose and character" of your use; (2) the "nature" of the underlying copyrighted work; (3) the "amount and substantiality" of what you're using, compared to the copyrighted work as a whole; and (4) the effect of your use on the value of, or market for, the copyrighted work. All four of course are subjective factors. Two judges might reach opposite conclusions about the same allegedly infringing

work – thus, the risk of quoting somebody else’s material (not to mention that even if you win, you may well have big legal bills). A few notes on the four factors:

- The first factor is sometimes the most important. Courts in the last quarter-century or so have said that if the potentially infringing work is “transformative,” there is less chance of copyright infringement. Transformativeness often involves commenting on or criticizing the copyrighted work, even though part of that work is quoted.
- The second factor can militate against a finding of fair use if the underlying copyrighted work isn’t public—say, if it’s still unpublished. After all, its creator has the right to decide to keep their creation private. Even so, the unpublished nature of a work doesn’t alone preclude a finding of fair use.
- “Amount and substantiality” mean that the less you use, the less likely there will be a finding of infringement. Even so, if you quote the “heart” of the protected work, you may be liable. In an important case in 1985, for example, the Supreme Court found that a magazine’s quotation of roughly 300 words from President’s Ford’s 200,000-words (less than 1 percent!) memoir wasn’t fair use. (At the time, the memoir had yet to be published.)
- If your work guts the value of a protected work, or at least may act as a directly market substitute for it, then a finding of fair use is less likely. A good example of a use that isn’t fair is a course-pack used in a college course; to comply with copyright law, such course-packs have to pay licensing fees to the rights-holders for materials distributed. Same thing in a college course in which the professor distributes the entirety of a single magazine article. There are obvious analogies to a website that quotes the entirety of an article published on

another website/

Fair use can't be used as "B" roll—secondary material such as establishing wide shots of a location; cutaway views of people, props or scenery; or audio used in a video. Much of what defines whether fair use applies is dictated by whether the excerpt goes to the heart of the copyrighted material (if so, it is a violation of fair use) or whether it is merely explanatory.

For example, a KCAL-TV broadcast of a 30-second clip taken from a 4-minute copyrighted video videotape that showed trucker Reginald Denny being beaten during the 1992 riots was found to violate fair use. The court ruled that the broadcast borrowed from the heart of the video, and affected the copyright owner's ability to market the work. Yet when documentarians took 41 seconds from a boxing match for use in a biography of Mohammed Ali, the court ruled it was not a violation of fair use because only a small amount of footage used, and its purpose was informational.

Be forewarned that music is often covered by copyright. You need permission to use it. Even Bach may be covered by copyright: not the actual compositions, but the particular recording you might want to use.

In 2005, the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers and the Independent Documentary Association endorsed a Statement of Best Practices, which defined four types of situations when producers need not seek permission under fair use:

- "Employing copyrighted material as object of social, political or cultural critique." In other words, the videographer can use a snippet of the copyrighted work for purposes of commentary or criticism.
- "Quoting copyrighted works of popular culture to illustrate an argument or point." The documentarian can use copyrighted material to convey a greater point—say, a clip from "The Godfather" to illustrate the ways that Italian-Americans have

been portrayed in movies over the years.

- “Capturing copyrighted media content in the process of filming something else.” If a filmmaker accidentally tapes a cover to the latest *Newsweek* while following a character past a newsstand, or records a street band playing “Every Breath You Take” while shooting a panoramic of Washington Square Park, they can still use that material to avoid falsifying reality.
- “Using copyrighted material in a historical sequence.” A filmmaker or documentarian wishing to make a historical point may want to use words spoken at that time, music associated with the event, or photos or films created at that time. The producer should seek to license the material, but if this is not possible, or is simply too expensive, they may seek a limited fair use exemption under the following conditions:

–The project was “not specifically designed around the material”;  
–it serves a vital critical function and there is no viable substitute;  
–the copyright holder is identified;  
–the project does not rely disproportionately on any single source.

Bottom lines: Tread lightly. Try to paraphrase. Use less rather than more. Hyperlinks to articles and other sources are OK – reproducing those articles and sources probably are not. Be especially wary of quoting unpublished material. Be especially wary of using song titles and lyrics in headlines. Also understand that the creator of expression owns the expression even if the work containing the expression is owned by someone else; for example, if Smith writes a letter to Jones, Jones owns the letter but Smith still owns Smith’s own expression, and Jones has no ability to grant you permission to quote the letter. Finally, try to get good legal advice. This summary here is intended as a primer – it does not constitute legal advice.

### **AGGREGATION**

Oftentimes national news outlets – particularly digital outlets – don't have the capacity to send reporters out to cover every single story they believe would be interesting to their audience. In these cases, the outlets flesh out their coverage with aggregation. Aggregation involves outlets collecting information from other sources – typically either other news outlets or individuals on social media who have posted content about the story.

Aggregation can be a point of contention between local and national news – small news outlets feel that when larger outlets use material that they originally published, they're being ripped off without getting any of the credit or the profits that would come from people reading the original article. But aggregation isn't inherently evil. When done correctly, aggregation can form a mutually beneficial relationship between local news sources (who have the best information about what goes on in their communities) and national news outlets (who have greater resources to share the story with a broader audience, which can in turn drive traffic to local news).

When aggregating information, to report the information as your own, you must verify it yourself. Even then, it's respectful to give a hat tip to the outlet which broke the story and link to their article.

Here's an [example from the New York Times](#): “From 2005 through last year, Representative Eddie Bernice Johnson, a Democrat who was first elected to Congress in 1992, provided 23 scholarships totaling \$25,000 to two of her grandsons, two of her great-nephews and to an aide's son and daughter. The Dallas Morning News first reported the story.”

If you cannot independently match information that's being reported by another outlet, but it's important enough that you must include it in your coverage, you need to attribute it back to that outlet. The same rule applies if you're using a quote that someone told another outlet.

Here's an [example from ABC World News Tonight](#): “The New York Times reports that the president asked acting AG Matt Whitaker to

allow a U.S. Attorney to take charge of the Michael Cohen case, even though that U.S. Attorney had recused himself.”

When aggregating, you should add new information to a story – whether that’s a new angle, new information or an expansion of the story. You still must report the story out. And it’s important to focus on the information that’s most pertinent to your specific audience and not take unnecessary details from the outlet that originally reported it.

In the case of using visual social media elements in your story, you must ask the person who took the images if you may use it in your coverage, if they want to be credited, and how they would like to be credited. Be specific about the conditions under which you will use their images and where the images will go. Sometimes, national outlets pay for using visual content that was created by other people, especially if that person is another member of the media. You do not need to ask for permission or pay if you’re using content from the social media account of a public figure or a government agency. If you’re using written posts or comments, it’s still a smart move to talk with the author to verify the information they’re sharing and to ask for permission to use it.

The baseline with aggregation is: attribute information and ask for permission. When in doubt about using material, ask your editor.

# II. Chapter II: Writing a News Story - Style, Ledes, and The Inverted Pyramid

Adapted from Libretext: Journalism 101 ([Writing the Hard News Story](#))

*“There is but one art—to omit.”*

– [Robert Louis Stevenson](#)

After completing your reporting and your interviews, you might be in no mood to read about how to write a news article. You're impatient. You've done your reporting, you're on deadline, and you'd like for everyone to shut up so you can work. Good. This is how your readers feel when they pick up your newspaper or call it up on their computer—they're smart and in a hurry and want you to tell them what you know so they can learn the news and move on.

So how do you write a news article? Clearly and succinctly. With hard news, you write short, declarative sentences that give lots of information coherently so the reader understands them effortlessly and they seem to have been effortless to produce, even simple.

But, of course, it's not *simple* to write clearly and succinctly! Pascal said he could make his writing shorter but he didn't have the time. The first paragraph of a newspaper article is called the **lead**, in newspaper lingo spelled “**lede**,” because newspaper type used to be set in lead and editors didn't want to mix up the two words. The way to write a lede is sit at the keyboard until small drops of blood form on your forehead. That's the old joke—and not all that funny. Some people can write up a snazzy newspaper lede instantly, but most of us flail away hideously, banging out a sentence, erasing it, writing it again, cutting it apart, and stitching it together until it reads like it's been in an accident. Eventually, though, we place the right words in the right order to say what we mean precisely, and that's when we

newspaper hacks are just like any artist who makes something super hard look easy. We are like Picasso, or Roger Federer, or that athlete playing the Sugar Plum Fairy, and just as they did, we sweated it out.

But now because you are so clever, you are looking at the clock (and not just at the clock but at the calendar), and you are thinking you'd better learn how to make good writing look easy in a big hurry, because you don't have time to write and erase, write and erase until the cows come home and Middlebury accepts someone else. Thus, you are eager for some inside tips on how to learn news writing quickly. Here are two of them: the first simple, the second complex.

The simple tip is this: Practice. You get good at doing this sort of writing by doing it over and over, getting the hang of it, the rhythm of it. It takes a while to quit writing too many words or too many complex sentence structures.

The more complex tip is this: You need to adopt a professional attitude that says *I'm not important here—the story is what's important here*, and my writing is not about *me*—it's about the story.

If you adopt this professional attitude, your mind will soon be preoccupied with relevant data only, such as: What am I trying to say in this newspaper article? And thus your mind will not go meandering down the time-consuming and pointless psychological roads our minds generally travel when we write for an audience, roads really more like halls than like roads, specifically like halls of mirrors, in front of which we pause in admiration, or in horror. This is a fabulous sentence, we think as we bang out a sentence, and we are so clever to have thought of it, and before we've strung together two independent clauses joined by a conjunction, we've already decided we're as good as Hemingway and better than John Grisham, whom we could write exactly like if we weren't aiming so much higher. Time meanwhile is passing, and the sentences aren't that good, believe me. This is because we always love our most overwritten sentences, because we think they show us off—how nifty we are, how clever with words, how sophisticated, whatever. We love ourselves, we love our dramas, we love our most dramatic

sentences. But, hey!—newspaper readers are not interested in us right now. They want to know the news.

So the hall of mirrors is a bad place to hang out when you think you're writing well, and it's even worse when you think you're writing badly. There you are, struggling with a lede. You keep writing the same exact sentence over and over (REDRUM), in the mirror you look like a hideous wreck, and you know you're a fraud and a loser; plus there's a Dali clock dripping down the wall. When you are writing on deadline, you don't need this distraction, believe me.

The bottom line: Just be professional, even when the writing's hard, even when you're too exhausted or frustrated to bother sweating blood. Just stay calm and remember you have the one gift you need in order to write well, and the newspaper's given it to you—you have something to say.

Here's how to do it:

## Style

- News writers get to the point and get out. So write simple, declarative sentences. Try to avoid dependent clauses.
- One line of typewritten 12-point type is two or more lines in a newspaper column; two-line computer sentences are four lines in a newspaper—and all of this is getting too long for your reader. Try to keep your sentences to 1.5 computer lines on average.
- If you want your prose to have power, use lots of nifty verbs. Think in verbs. Deliberately use action verbs and take time to select them.
- Use the active, not passive, voice. Know the difference between the two. (The active voice puts the subject first: “Sally ran,” or “John hit the wall.” The passive voice puts the subject last: “The wall was hit by John.” Or, if the subject is not

important, leave it out: “The rodents were trapped,” and who cares by whom! But consider what happens if the subject actually is important, but the passive voice construction omits it—then you get a sentence like this: “The CIA agent’s name was leaked,” or “During the protest, shots were fired.” Well, okay, but who leaked? Who fired? The passive voice is dangerous; it allows facts to disappear.)

- Be repulsed by clichés.
- The opening paragraphs (or **grafs**) of a hard news story, along with the sentences themselves, are likely to feel like puzzles whose pieces you must fit together, or like very fine gold necklaces that tangle easily. If you start to come unglued, relax and think about how you would tell this news story to a friend. You would get to the point immediately with the most important thing first (a squirrel attacked the English teacher!) and take it from there in the next graf, giving the next bit of information that your friend would logically want to know. Keep the sentences short, keep the paragraphs short, and after those first few grafs, the story will write itself.

## The Lede

- As the first paragraph of a story, the lede gives the most important information. Readers often simply glance at the lede, so above all, write it clearly. Do not confuse the reader!
- The lede must be supported by the content of the story. If your story doesn’t end up supporting your lede, change the lede or spike the story.
- A **direct lede**, also known as a summary lede, gives a summary of the story’s main facts and will emphasize what is important of the WWWWWH list: who, what, when, where, why, how. It should be one sentence long, 30 words or less.
- A **blind lede** is a lede that refers to people but saves their

names for a later paragraph.

- A **nut graf** is a paragraph that follows the lede and fills in crucial information.

To learn the craft of writing ledes and nut grafs, practice, practice, practice. You can copy ledes from your newspaper verbatim—that’s actually a useful way to get the hang of them—or you can hide the lede of an article, read the rest of the story, and then go back and try to write the lede. Compare it to the published lede, and you’ll see how quickly you’re learning. And if you aren’t learning so quickly, not to worry. Join the crowd. Soon you’ll understand the little saying about beads of blood on your forehead.

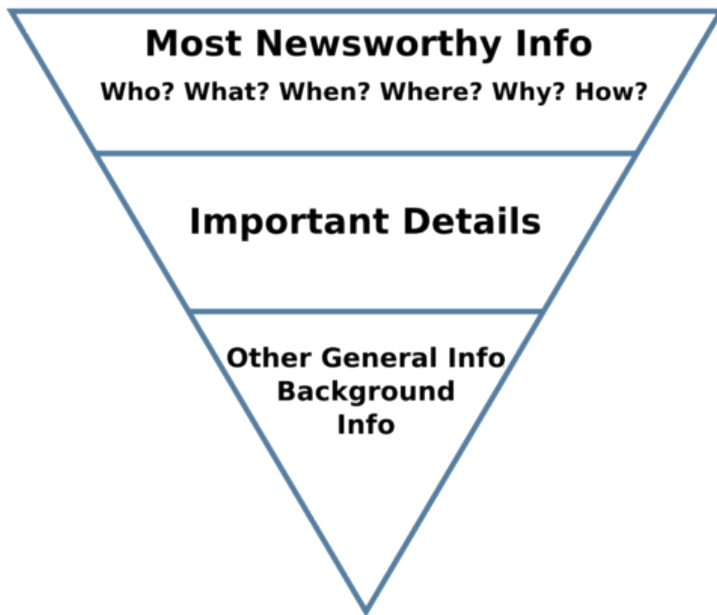
To wit: Let’s say you’re writing an article about a high school band holding a fundraiser for one of the musicians whose family lost their house in a fire. The first time you write the lede, you’re likely to write something like: “The Tallant Marching Band will hold a fundraising carnival to raise money for the band’s trumpet player whose family lost all their possessions after a fire broke out in their home and destroyed all the home’s contents.” That’s not a hideous lede by any means. But it’s not good, either. Well, actually, it’s a bit hideous, because it is so repetitive. You should give your reader information once and that’s enough; then get on with the next bit of information. Here’s a better lede for that story: “The Tallant Marching Band will hold a fundraiser next week for their trumpet player whose family lost their house in a fire.” Now, you’re probably thinking that sentence is not a glorious piece of prose. It’s sort of bland, no big deal. And in some ways you’re right—it’s no big deal. But it’s a good, solid lede, and it was not easy to craft.

## The Inverted Pyramid

- The **inverted pyramid** is the basic structure for a breaking

news story. It begins with a direct lede. The second paragraph (nut graf) tries to answer questions a reader would naturally ask after reading the lede. The next most important facts follow in the next paragraph, and so on, so if readers don't have time to finish your article or don't feel like it, they'll get the most important ideas up high. You add quotes along the way, not before crucial information, but soon enough to add a human voice to a hard news story.

- Each paragraph should be one sentence long or two at most.
- There are several other structures for newspaper stories, but they are most effective with feature stories. For now, practice the inverted pyramid for hard news stories. The inverted pyramid gets the job done.



A diagram of the inverted pyramid structure.

## Quotes

- Quotes must be verbatim or else edited in such a way that they accurately (that's ACCURATELY, not "adequately") convey the speaker's meaning *and* intention. If you cut words from a quote, you indicate you've done so with ellipsis: "...". If you replace words in a quote, you indicate this with square brackets around [your replacement].
- Individual words or phrases from a quote shouldn't be inserted into your prose, as you would do with quotations from a work of literature. Instead, keep a source's quote intact. Either precede it, or follow it, with the source's name.
- Quotes should add color to your story or offer information in a rich way. Don't use quotes simply to deliver information that you might just as easily present in prose, unless, of course, the person giving the information is also significant to the story. For example, if the President of the United States said, "The law should be voted on this afternoon at 4 p.m.," you might offer that as a direct quote. It reveals something about the President's attention to this issue; it's giving the readers something more than simply the time of the vote. If one of his aides said the exact same thing, you would present the information in prose, not in the form of a direct quote.
- If you get a good quote from a source, just write it up. Don't precede the quote with a sentence about what it says. Your reader can figure that out for herself.
- Really terrific quotes are called "money quotes"—as in: Ka-ching, I got it on the record.

## Attribution

- If you see something with your own eyes, if the information is common knowledge, or if you can learn it from three printed sources, you can present it as fact.
- You must attribute everything else to a source.
- Try to place one source's information in successive sentences, so you only need to attribute the information once per graf.
- Otherwise, each sentence must contain an attribution.
- Use "he said" and "she said" when reporting what a source says to you. Do not use "claimed," "announced," "admitted," "replied," "shouted," "retorted," "argued," "insisted," or any other synonym for "said." All other synonyms carry shades of meaning and thus editorialize the news story. But news stories do not contain opinion. Just use "said."
- Use "according to" if your source is a document or report or if the source is offering you information but not quotes.
- On first reference, use a person's full name and title. Some titles precede the name (e.g. President Barack Obama, Justice Ruth Ginsberg), but most often a title will come after a name (e.g. Jennifer Jones, Superintendent of Schools).
- After a first reference, use a person's last name only, preceded by Mr., Mrs., Ms., or Miss (depending on the stylebook).
- Newspapers use a **stylebook**, such as [The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage](#) or [The Associated Press Stylebook](#), to keep these and other style rules consistent.

## Elements of Structure and Balance

- Use a quotation early in the story to bring in a human voice.
- Provide background after the breaking news.

- Go through the accuracy checklist from David Yarnold, Executive Editor of the [San Jose Mercury News](#): **Accuracy Checklist from the San Jose Mercury News**
  - Is the lede of the story sufficiently supported?
  - Has someone double-checked, called, or visited all the phone numbers, addresses, or web addresses in the story? What about the names and titles?
  - Is the background material required to understand the story complete?
  - Are all the stakeholders in the story identified, and have representatives from that side been contacted and given a chance to talk?
  - Does the story pick sides or make subtle value judgments? Will some people like this story more than they should?
  - Is anything missing?
  - Are all the quotes accurate and properly attributed, and do they capture what the person really meant?
- Read the story once more before you turn it in, checking that you do not editorialize or shade the story by your word choice or sentence structure, the arrangement of paragraphs, or the inclusion or exclusion of material. (More on this in the “Ethics and the Law” chapter of this book.)

## Exercises

1. With a sticky note, cover up the first graf of a news story. Read the rest of the story, and then write an original lede. Compare your lede to the printed version.
2. Take one page of a newspaper, and read each story on the page. Write a tweet (140 characters or less) that describes the essence of each story. Looking only at your tweets, decide on the verb that belongs in each lede.
3. Take a hard news story and deconstruct it into a bullet-pointed list of facts or pieces of information, with no prose. Then reconstruct it back into an article in the inverted

pyramid structure.

4. Take the same news story notes and reconstruct the article again, this time with a different story structure.

# 12. Chapter 12: Maintaining a Neutral Tone

## Just the facts

(from [Journalism 101: Libretext](#))

### Tone

- The tone of a news story should be neutral (just the facts, ma'am), and while ordinarily that tone can be stiff or dull, in a news story it's exactly right for two crucial reasons. First of all, tone carries meaning. If your tone is emphatic, angry, melancholy, low-brow, high-brow, laid-back, critical, or, really, anything but neutral, that tone conveys an opinion. But you don't want your opinion seeping into a hard news story. Secondly, a neutral tone is appropriate because the information being delivered—not the language it's delivered in—carries the sentence's energy. To wit: "The President today pardoned a staff member for lying to a jury about the Vice President's participation in a campaign against an FBI agent's reputation." This sentence has a neutral tone, but it's a bomb all right.
- Don't use inflated or sensational tone to create meaning where none exists.
- Don't select sources with only a specific point of view and then use neutral language to disguise this bias.
- Be sensitive to the denotation and connotation of words. (Good intentions don't matter, only impact does. Our world is

changing rapidly and it's important to use accepted and respectful words. Use the AP Style for this.)

## Point of View

From NYU Journalism Handbook for Students:  
Ethics, Law and Good Practice

*By Prof. Adam L. Penenberg*

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### OBJECTIVITY VS. SUBJECTIVITY

In a hard news piece, the expectation is that the journalist is attempting to convey the facts impartially. That is to say, objectively. But some magazines, digital journalism and many other newsmedia value a strong point of view; the journalist lets the research take them to where they need to go. Often, that requires them to take sides, if the facts warrant it. Some argue that the “he said, she said” form of journalism, in which a reporter tries to balance two opposing sides, often results in an inaccurate article, since one side may be right and the other wrong. When in doubt, consult with your professor. Remember that journalism can be good—or bad—whether or not it is opinionated. The true test of journalistic quality is not whether the reporter has an opinion, but whether the article—opinionated or not—is informed by a fair assessment of the facts.

[Writing Commons](#) News or Opinion?

## News or Opinion?

- Written by [Christine Photinos](#)

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Research we do on the web and through library databases often leads us to content from newspapers, magazines, and news agencies (such as Reuters and the Associated Press). What all news content has in common is that it connects in some way to something that is new or in the news.

News content can be roughly divided into the categories of *news* and *opinion*. News articles attempt to provide information on a current event, while opinion pieces attempt to persuade readers to adopt a particular position on that event.

The distinction between news and opinion is not black and white. An example of one grey area is “advocacy reporting”—when news is reported from an explicit perspective. For example, news articles published in the Humane Society magazine—*All Animals*—generally serve the organization’s larger agenda of promoting humane treatment of animals

(Example: “[Big Changes at SeaWorld](#)” *All Animals* May/June 2016).

Another subcategory of news that can at times seem to enter into this grey area is “news analysis”—news writing that pushes beyond surface answers to the 5 W’s and H (Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How?) to explore causes and consequences of news events (Example: “[Grammy Awards 2018: How the Recording Academy has Evolved Toward Relevance](#)” *LA Times* Nov. 28, 2017).

More generally, we should recognize that the way in which news is presented—including what information is selected for inclusion, and what words and images are used to communicate that information—can encourage particular understandings or perspectives. We should always be alert to such factors in news reporting, and to significant departures from accepted standards of journalistic fairness and accuracy.

But to reject the journalistic distinction between news and opinion is to turn all sources into an undifferentiated mass of “information.” An analogy: These days many movies contain commercial messages (for example, [product placement](#)) and many commercials have taken on movie-like qualities (consider [this AT&T ad—titled “Whole New World.”](#) for example). Yet we still value the ability to distinguish between these two types of content and to refer to them by different names. (Without different names for these two types of content, how would we express frustration with a feature-length Burger King ad? What words would we use?)

Skillful researchers are able to identify sources by type, even in circumstances when they do not believe a source has achieved the highest ideals of its type. Below (Table 1) are some defining features of “news” and “opinion.”

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### News

The writer reports the news. People’s opinions may appear as part of that reporting (“According to Mr. Smith...”), but the writer does not explicitly present his/her own views.

### Opinion

The writer shares his or her own views and explicitly seeks to persuade readers to adopt those views as their own.

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#### **Table 1**

Below (Table 2) are some *sub*-categories of news and opinion:

<https://7d529084b43a65d5dd1304383e1f9a0f.safeframe.e.gogglesyndication.com/safeframe/1-0-38/html/container.html>

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## News

**News Article** An article written to inform readers about recent events. The author reports essential information (who/what/where/when/why/how).

**News Analysis** An article written to inform readers about recent events. The author reports *and* attempts to deepen understanding of recent events—for example, by providing background information and other kinds of additional context.

Compared with news articles, feature articles are often more creative or exploratory and less focused on efficient delivery of essential information.

**Feature Article** For example, while a news article may detail the most recent revelations about a politician's extramarital affair, a feature article may offer in-depth reporting on a single aspect of the revelations, or the revelations may function as a “[news peg](#)” for the feature article's more general exploration of infidelity.

Other types of news content that are generally categorized as “feature” writing include how-to-do-it articles (for example, how to shop for a new phone) and profiles (for example, an article about a movie actor starring in a recently-released film).

## Opinion

Editorial	An unsigned opinion piece that represents the views of the news organization's editorial staff.
Opinion piece	An opinion article by a staff columnist or guest columnist. (If a guest columnist, the writer's credentials will almost always be identified.)
Review	An evaluation of a book, movie, album, live performance, etc.

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**Table 2**

### Distinguishing between News and Opinion: An Example

Compare the two texts that follow. In the first, “Get Children Off Web and in Libraries,” the reporter quotes the opinions of others but does not offer her own opinions. In the second, “Why Libraries are Key,” the author explicitly takes a stand and seeks to persuade readers to adopt a particular position on an issue.

## News

### ***Get children off web and in libraries, says Laureate***

Children are failing to learn properly because they are churning out facts copied from the internet instead of going to the library, according to the new Children's Laureate<sup>1</sup>.

Julia Donaldson, the best-selling author of *The Gruffalo*, set out her stall on the day of her appointment by speaking out against the Government's planned library closures, arguing that they are vital for children's education<sup>1</sup>.

*Opinions are attributed to another person (Donaldson). They are not presented as the reporter's own view.*<sup>1</sup>

Source:

Singh, Anita. "Get Children Off Web and in Libraries, says Laureate." *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 June 2011, 8.

## Opinion

### ***Why libraries are key to our kids' futures***

Children's use of libraries has increased every year for the past six years.

As the Children's Laureate I want to make sure

that<sub>2</sub> continues, and to do all I can to keep libraries open so that children can use them.

Without this resource I'm convinced that we will<sub>2</sub> have far fewer avid child readers and consequently lose a large percentage of our future adult readers.

*Notice that the author presents her own views, credentials, and objectives<sub>2</sub>.*

Source:

Donaldson, Julia. "Why Libraries are Key to Our Kids Futures." *The Sun*, 14 October 2011, 40.

## News or Opinion? Test your understanding.

Identify each excerpt that follows as an example of *news* or *opinion*. (Discussion of each example appears at the end of this section.)

### 1. **Jeremy Hunt: No Public Interest in Nude**

**Prince Harry Photographs** Speaking to BBC News this morning, Mr. Hunt said: "Personally I cannot see what the public interest was in publishing those." "But we have a free press," he added, "and I don't think it is right for politicians to tell newspaper editors what they can and cannot publish. That must be a matter for the newspaper editors." He suggested that the public should give the Prince "a break", days after the daily tabloid published photographs obtained by gossip website

TMZ.

Source:

“Jeremy Hunt: No Public Interest in Nude Prince Harry Photographs.” *The Telegraph*, 26 August 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/prince-harry/9500433/Jeremy-Hunt-No-public-interest-in-nude-Prince-Harry-photographs.html>

2. **Social Media Content Could Make, Break**

**Professional Life** Do you remember your last tweet? What about last month’s Facebook or Instagram posts? It is all out there somewhere, and employers very well may see something that could hurt their opinion of you. Tyler Willingham, a senior in marketing and a peer career adviser, was curious to know exactly what an employer’s goal is when perusing a prospective employee’s social media. After speaking with a mentor from a previous internship Willingham held, he found his answer: “It’s not really an issue of what they look for,” Willingham said “but what they try not to find.”

Career Services interim director Stephanie Kit said some of the things employers hope not to find are pictures and posts involving alcohol or drug usage, negative comments about a current or previous employer and any discriminatory content.

Source:

Lipps, Michael. “Social Media Content Could

Make, Break Professional Life.” *University of Tennessee Daily Beacon*, 15 April 2015, [www.utdailybeacon.com/news/2015/apr/15/social-media-content-could-make-break-professional/](http://www.utdailybeacon.com/news/2015/apr/15/social-media-content-could-make-break-professional/).

3. **‘Kid Nation’ Lesson: Be Careful What You Pitch** On Friday, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the union that represents performers but not contestants on reality shows, said it was investigating whether the children on “Kid Nation” should have been covered by the union’s work rules. With “Kid Nation,” CBS confronted several new situations created by the fact that it was working with children rather than adults. If “Kid Nation” had been set in California, New York or several other states, it would have been subject to laws that limit the amount of time a child could spend on the set of the program each day. It chose instead to shoot the program in New Mexico, where until this summer there was no law addressing children’s work on television or film productions.

That is not to say that New Mexico had not contemplated such limits. Before CBS took the 40 children to the state, its Legislature had already passed a bill that would have outlawed much of what CBS had planned.

On April 3, two days after CBS started shooting the 13-episode reality series, Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico signed the bill into law. It limits

children ages 8 to 15 to eight to nine hours' work a day on television and film productions.

On the set of "Kid Nation," the children regularly worked more than 12 hours a day, and their contract required that they be available to the show's producers to be videotaped 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

But because the new law was not scheduled to go into effect until June 15, roughly one month after "Kid Nation" finished production, lawyers for CBS have contended that everything they did was in compliance with the law "in effect at the time of production."

But it is not clear whether CBS was in compliance. New Mexico child-labor statutes limit children under the age of 14 to 44 hours of work in one week and eight hours in any day, unless a special permit has been granted. [...]

Source:

Wyatt, Edward. "Kid Nation' Lesson: Be Careful What You Pitch." *New York Times*, 25 August 2007, B7.

4. **Sometimes, the Teachers Bully the Students**The government of Alberta has re-introduced its Education Act, which addresses the issue of student bullying in schools. The bill affirms that students are entitled to learning environments that are welcoming, caring, respectful and safe. The government is to be

commended both for its process in engaging the community, and for the resulting new provisions. For example, the bill's definition of bullying acknowledges that bullying is intentional and repetitive, and that it can cause harm, fear and distress to victims in the school community. Moreover, the bill wisely addresses not just the situation where a student bullies fellow students, but where a student bullies other individuals in the school community. Such recognition that students can bully adults is important because research suggests that students often bully their teachers.

Yet, the bill fails to acknowledge that the imbalance of power between teachers and students creates an opportunity for bullying of students by adults. [...] The bill ought to recognize and address the possibility of bullying behavior by adults who work in schools.

Source:

Buchfink, Jaclyn, and Juliet Guichon. "Sometimes, the Teachers Bully the Students." *Calgary Herald*, 21 February 2012, A13.

## Discussion

1. **Jeremy Hunt: No Public Interest in Nude Prince Harry Photographs** Speaking to BBC News

this morning, Mr. Hunt said: “Personally I cannot see what the public interest was in publishing those.””But we have a free press,” he added, “and I don’t think it is right for politicians to tell newspaper editors what they can and cannot publish. That must be a matter for the newspaper editors.”He suggested that the public should give the Prince “a break”, days after the daily tabloid published photographs obtained by gossip website TMZ.

#### 1. News

-This piece deals almost exclusively with an opinion, but the opinion is *not* that of the author.  
-Rather, the author is *reporting on* the opinion of a public figure (British Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt).

#### 2. **Social Media Content Could Make, Break**

**Professional Life**Do you remember your last tweet? What about last month’s Facebook or Instagram posts? It is all out there somewhere, and employers very well may see something that could hurt their opinion of you.Tyler Willingham, a senior in marketing and a peer career adviser, was curious to know exactly what an employer’s goal is when perusing a prospective employee’s social media. After speaking with a mentor from a previous internship Willingham held, he found his answer:“It’s not really an issue of what they look for,” Willingham said “but what they try not to find.”

Career Services interim director Stephanie Kit said some of the things employers hope not to find are pictures and posts involving alcohol or drug usage, negative comments about a current or previous employer and any discriminatory content.

## 2. News

-This is an example of a “feature”-style news piece. The presentation is more creative than that of a news article, and the headline expresses a claim. But the author is still primarily *reporting on the views of others*.

### 3. **‘Kid Nation’ Lesson: Be Careful What You**

**Pitch**On Friday, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the union that represents performers but not contestants on reality shows, said it was investigating whether the children on “Kid Nation” should have been covered by the union’s work rules. With “Kid Nation,” CBS confronted several new situations created by the fact that it was working with children rather than adults. If “Kid Nation” had been set in California, New York or several other states, it would have been subject to laws that limit the amount of time a child could spend on the set of the program each day. It chose instead to shoot the program in New Mexico, where until this summer there was no law addressing children’s work on television or film productions.

That is not to say that New Mexico had not

contemplated such limits. Before CBS took the 40 children to the state, its Legislature had already passed a bill that would have outlawed much of what CBS had planned.

On April 3, two days after CBS started shooting the 13-episode reality series, Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico signed the bill into law. It limits children ages 8 to 15 to eight to nine hours' work a day on television and film productions.

On the set of "Kid Nation," the children regularly worked more than 12 hours a day, and their contract required that they be available to the show's producers to be videotaped 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

But because the new law was not scheduled to go into effect until June 15, roughly one month after "Kid Nation" finished production, lawyers for CBS have contended that everything they did was in compliance with the law "in effect at the time of production."

But it is not clear whether CBS was in compliance. New Mexico child-labor statutes limit children under the age of 14 to 44 hours of work in one week and eight hours in any day, unless a special permit has been granted.

### 3. News

-This is an example of a "News Analysis" article. It does not merely report Who, What, Where, When, Why and How (though we do see these elements

in the top paragraph) but rather attempts to provide readers with a better understanding of the broader context and complexities of the news event.

4. **Sometimes, the Teachers Bully the**

**Students**The government of Alberta has re-introduced its Education Act, which addresses the issue of student bullying in schools. The bill affirms that students are entitled to learning environments that are welcoming, caring, respectful and safe. The government is to be commended both for its process in engaging the community, and for the resulting new provisions. For example, the bill's definition of bullying acknowledges that bullying is intentional and repetitive, and that it can cause harm, fear and distress to victims in the school community. Moreover, the bill wisely addresses not just the situation where a student bullies fellow students, but where a student bullies other individuals in the school community. Such recognition that students can bully adults is important because research suggests that students often bully their teachers.

Yet, the bill fails to acknowledge that the imbalance of power between teachers and students creates an opportunity for bullying of students by adults [...]. The bill ought to recognize and address the possibility of bullying behavior by adults who work in schools.

#### 4. Opinion

-While the authors do report on the positions and research findings of others, they are essentially putting forward their own position.

-Notice that the opinions expressed in this piece are not attributed to others, as in the previous examples. The opinions belong to the authors.

### Further Study

Journalistic norms and practices are always evolving. The rise of 24-hour cable news networks and the internet has led many traditional news outlets to differentiate themselves by offering more analysis, contextualization, and interpretation in their reporting. Another factor in this evolution has been a growing disenchantment with older ideals of detached reporting—especially the most rigid interpretation of these ideals, in which objectivity is understood to dictate a narrow focus on the surface details of news phenomena, and in which even identification of verifiable falsehoods in the statements of public officials might be considered a breach of journalistic objectivity.

For further study, see:

Esser, Frank, and Andrea Umbricht. “The Evolution of Objective and Interpretative Journalism in the Western Press.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, vol. 91, no. 2, 2014, pp. 229-249.

Maras, Steven. *Objectivity in Journalism*. Polity Press, 2013.

Seyb, Ronald P. "What Walter Saw: Walter Lippmann, the New York World, and Scientific Advocacy as an Alternative to the News-Opinion Dichotomy." *Journalism History*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2015, pp. 58-72.

# 13. Chapter 13: AP Style Basics

## Associated Press style basics

The basics of Associated Press style from Boston University's College of Communications.



Image by M.  
H. from  
Pixabay

by [Leighton Walter Kille](#) | May 7, 2009 - On [The Journalist's Resource](#)

The Associated Press was founded more than 160 years ago and now has thousands of employees working in more than a hundred countries for a readership that numbers in the millions. AP style is designed to address the challenges of the organization's large size and readership. It had to be easy for reporters and editors to use and also produce stories that are clear and concise.

To achieve these goals, The [Associated Press Stylebook](#) is intentionally compact and direct, giving up comprehensiveness in

exchange for brevity. While this can leave many reporters' questions unanswered, the problems most frequently encountered are addressed.

This article is a summary of AP style. Below you'll find information on numbers, time and dates, locations, phone numbers, punctuation, capitalization and titles, and the Internet. This isn't an exhaustive list, but it will get you started.

### **Numbers**

One through nine are spelled out, 10 and above are figures (Arabic numerals). If a sentence begins with a number, it should be spelled out or the sentence rewritten. The exception is a numeral that identifies a calendar year. Use figures in tables.

Percentages: Use figures and the word *percent*.

Million, billion: Always use figures and spell out the words *million* and *billion*.

### **Time and dates**

Month, day: Use numerals for days without *st*, *nd*, *rd* or *th* and abbreviate the months August through February when used with a date: "Feb. 12 was particularly cold." Do not abbreviate the months March through July: "March 12 was rainy." Always spell out months with no dates: "October is her favorite month." Do not separate months and years with a comma: "He left for Bhutan in October 1937." Set off years with commas when there is a specific date: "The mortgage was paid off April 1, 1998, and they threw a party that night."

Time: Use lowercase *a.m.* and *p.m.*, with periods. Always use figures, with a space between the time and the *a.m.* or *p.m.*: "By 6:30 *a.m.* she was long gone." If it's an exact hour, no ":00" is required. If a time range is entirely in the morning or evening, use *a.m.* or *p.m.* only once: "6:30-10 *p.m.*" If it goes from the morning into the evening (or vice versa), you need both: "10 *a.m.*-2 *p.m.*"

### **Cities and states**

Datelines: Put the city name in capital letters, generally followed by the state or country, and then a long dash. Certain large cities can stand alone; see the AP Stylebook for a listing.

State names: When used on their own, spell these out: “Massachusetts is on the Atlantic Ocean.” When there’s a city or party affiliation, abbreviate: “Cambridge, Mass., is a hip place”; “D-Mass.” There are eight states that are never abbreviated: Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas and Utah. Two-letter forms of state names are used only with zip codes: “Send mail to 79 JFK St., Cambridge, MA 02138.”

### **Phone numbers**

Area codes and country codes get no special treatment and aren’t preceded by a 1 or plus sign. Use hyphens between groups of numbers: “He dialed 617-123-4567 and crossed his fingers.”

### **Punctuation**

Hyphen: Hyphenate compound adjectives only if required for clarity: “fastest-growing company”; “high-level discussion.” Don’t use hyphens with commonly understood terms, adverbs that end in *ly* and between figures and units of measure: “greatly exaggerated claims”; “2 percent rule.” Do not use a hyphen with a compound modifier after the noun: “The driver was well paid.”

Dash: Dashes set off a series within a phrase: “Of the many breakfast options – omelets, waffles, pastries – he only wanted coffee”; indicate a break in thought: “Felipe’s is a popular eatery – in Harvard Square”; or attribute a quotation to an author: “‘You must do the thing you think you cannot do.’ – Eleanor Roosevelt.” When using text editors that don’t support dashes, use two hyphens for each dash.

Comma: In lists of three or more items, do not use a comma before the conjunction: “The recipe called for flour, butter and foie gras.” Exceptions are made if the elements in the series are complex phrases or if the series includes an element with a conjunction: “He doesn’t eat anything but pizza, Twizzlers, and macaroni and cheese.” Use a comma to set off a person’s town of residence, age and other such information: “Tom Menino, Boston, was a popular speaker”; “Jean Dupont, 32, was released yesterday.”

Period: Use only one space after the end of a sentence. Period.

Colon: Capitalize the first word after a colon only if it’s followed by

a complete sentence. Colons go outside quotes unless they're part of the quoted material.

**Apostrophe:** An apostrophe indicates possession. Add an 's to all single nouns and names, even if they already end in an s: "My boss's vacation begins tomorrow." For singular proper names ending in s, use only an apostrophe: "Kansas' crisis." For plurals of a single letter, add an apostrophe and an s: "Mind your p's and q's," "the Oakland A's." Do not use apostrophes for decades or acronyms: the 1990s, CDs.

**Quotation marks:** Periods and commas go inside quote marks: "Reginald, your hairstyle makes me nervous," she said." The position of dashes, semicolons, exclamation and question marks depends on what's being questioned or exclaimed: "Was she right to say, 'Your shoes are a joke'?"

**Parentheses:** AP style suggests avoiding parentheses when possible, and instead rewriting text or using dashes or commas to set off the information. If parentheses are required the rules are: If the parenthetical is a complete, independent sentence, place the period inside the parentheses; if not, the period goes outside.

### **Capitalization and titles**

**Works:** Things such as books, movies, paintings and so on get title-style capitalization and quotation marks: "He couldn't put down 'The AP Stylebook'"; "Her favorite album was 'Love Is Hell.'"

**Individuals:** Capitalize a person's title only if it precedes his or her name and isn't modified: "Chief Executive Officer Leon Redbone"; "Leon Redbone, chief executive officer of Swizzle Stick, Inc."

**Everything else:** When in doubt, use sentence-style capitalization and roman type. This applies to website buttons, press releases and most PowerPoint decks.

### **The Internet**

The words *Internet* and *Web* are capitalized: "She spent a lot of time on the Web"; "Their Internet-access speed was excellent." Other Web-related terms have a variety of treatments: *website*, *Web page*, *Web 2.0*. Note that AP adjusts its style to reflect current usage – not long ago they considered *Web site* to be two words, but now

recommend *website* – and given the fast-changing nature of the Web, such adaptations are certain to continue.

Email: One word, no hyphen. Related words are generally hyphenated: e-reader, e-commerce.

URLs: In general-purpose text, addresses are given in the same typeface as the text in which they appear: “The address is <https://journalistsresource.org>.”

Website names: Use title-style capitalization and roman type: “He loves the Journalist’s Resource.”

*Tags: capitalization, punctuation*

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## About The Author

*Leighton Walter Kille*

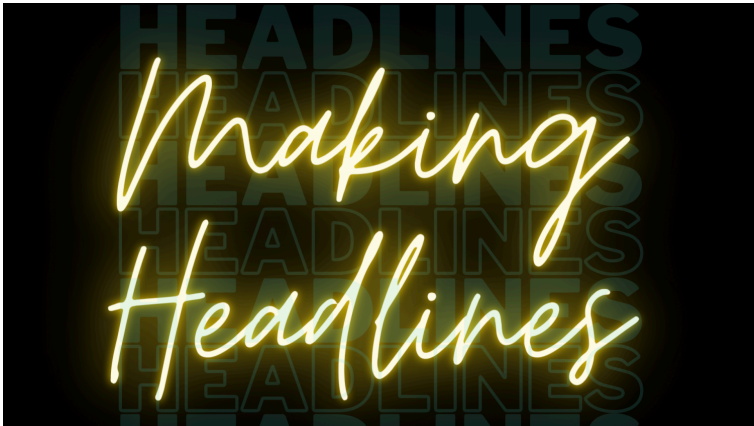
Research editor, Journalist’s Resource. Formerly assistant arts editor at the Boston Globe, senior editor of the Boston Phoenix (RIP), managing editor of the San Francisco Bay Guardian (also RIP) and managing editor at the South American Explorer (still with us).

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# 14. Chapter 14: Writing Headlines

## Making Headlines

[SchoolJournalism Staff](#) | September 21, 2021



From yearbooks to newspapers, websites to infographics, and everything in between, headlines are critical to draw in readers. Yet, headlines are often taken for granted and not talked about nearly enough in the Journalism classroom. A great place to start is reading this article and sharing it with your students.

**Headlines do hold historic importance that resonates today.** Headlines date back to when increased competition between newspapers led to the use of bolder and stronger headlines. The name of the game was grabbing someone's attention so they would purchase YOUR newspaper and not the competition's!

Jump forward to the day of online news outlets. Headlines are just as important as in the past. When news outlets share articles on

social media, it is the headline that catches the reader's eye. It is the deciding factor when it comes to whether a reader is going to click the link and read the article.

**Let's start with the basics.** A headline is simply a bold or larger line of text at the top of a story to draw the reader in by summarizing or introducing the story below. A headline's job calls attention to the story.

**Headlines tips at a glance:**

- Keep it short and to the point
- Use a subject and verb – if not in the headline, use them in the subhead
- If you are concerned about SEO (search engine optimization), incorporate a highly-searched keyword
- Be accurate and specific
- Be clear so readers know what to expect in the article
- Use present tense and active verbs
- Avoid vague pronouns such as *they*
- Avoid clichés
- Know your target audience to better appeal to their interests

**Let's dig a little deeper.**

**Headlines focus on the main point.** When writing a headline, ask yourself this question: *If I could tell the reader only one thing about this article in one sentence, what would it be?* This is one of the best ways to find the right words for a headline.

**Action verbs help!** Draw readers into the story with headlines sporting an action verb or two. Those verbs give headlines energy!

Remember to be accurate with the verbs you choose. Use specific verbs to describe a single action instead of ambiguous ones that hold a variety of meanings.

For example: East Central College Gets \$1,000

The verb *gets* is weak and lacks specific details. The reader is left with too many questions. Did East Central College win, steal, or

borrow \$1,000? Did that \$1,000 magically fall from the sky? Was it donated? Oh, and where is that \$1,000 going?

A stronger and more specific verb would have made a huge clarifying difference.

For example: Anonymous \$1,000 Donation Boosts East Central College's Culinary Arts Program

**People are emotional by nature.** Appealing to emotion is another way to capture a reader's attention. Just make sure the emotional appeal is a fitting extension of the story. And, as tempting as it may be to say the murder of a child is a "Mother's Worst Nightmare," it is important to steer clear of clichés and over-used phrases.

"Medium" has several tips for creating emotional headlines. [How to Create Emotional Headlines for your Next Posts](#)

**There's always more to learn about headlines.** With that said, here are a four more helpful links for your consideration:

[40 Headlines: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly](#)

[The Secret to Writing Great Headlines for Your News Stories](#)

[Writing Great Headlines – Michigan State University School of Journalism](#)

[Poynter's 9 Tips for Writing Stronger Headlines](#)

# 15. Chapter 15: Writing Feature Stories

## [From Journalism 101: Libretex](#)

*“In any really good subject, one has only to probe deep enough to come to tears.”* – Edith Wharton

Hard news stories require a direct lede (“Gimme the facts, Conrad, I wanna know what happened!”) as the immediacy of events provokes the readers’ desire for information. A feature story, by contrast, floats free; it is dreamed up by an editor or reporter who stumbles onto something, or more likely someone, and thinks, Well, there could be a story here. The story may be timely, with a news peg (It’s opening day at that little swimming pond; let’s send a reporter to check it out), or it may connect to nothing except a journalist’s curiosity (Remember that kid, the basketball player who got shot? What’s going on with him now?). But one thing every feature story should have is a heart, and the feature writer’s job is to find that thing and show it beating. You do this, first, by reporting and, specifically, by gathering details. Deciding what details are good to include and which ones readers don’t care or don’t need to know about is challenging. Story from an anonymous reporter:

I was once assigned to write a profile of a county commissioner who met me at the construction site of a new public library. I described how he plowed right toward me through the mud, never even hiking up his pants, and I guarantee you that anyone who read the rest of that article forgot—just as I have forgotten—every other thing I said about the man. I wrote a long story; it went on for columns and columns. I described the guy’s job (as if writing his

résumé), his “challenges” (his was a boring job), and, I presume, his life, but I don’t remember now if he was married or single or straight or gay or happy or miserable or devoted to county commissioning or just going through the motions in order to get to the bocce pit, not that he played bocce, or maybe he did, I wouldn’t know. I so completely failed to locate the heart of this man or show it beating that my story was totally DOA, kaput except for that one detail about the mud.

Details are what matter, details are the definition of “probing deep,” and if you want to write feature stories, details are what you must collect, like butterflies, like stamps and coins. They are treasures.

As for how to write the feature story once you’ve done your reporting and gathered all those details, most of the old rules apply. Write tight. Write clean. Keep it simple; make it look easy. Do not think about yourself when you write—think about the story; give the readers the story, not your performance art in black on white.

But having said all that, writing features is different from writing hard news. Features can contain mood, atmosphere, emotion, and even irony, as well as information; thus, with features, you have more room in your writing for creativity, for style. One editor was known to say, “when you write a story, you should think of yourself as a mirror and a sponge. You’re a mirror as you accurately reflect the world of your story, and you’re a sponge as you soak up all the emotion and humanity of the people in it. Then you return to the newsroom and squeeze all of that onto your keyboard.

Here is that editor agreeing to let a reporter write a feature story about a basketball player the editor knew who’d been shot:

*“The kid was a lightening-fast athlete who could leap and twirl only a few weeks ago. Now, he cannot even walk, let alone soar. Healthy, paralyzed; great future, no future; happy, miserable.*

If you are going to write this story well, the only way to pull it out is to dig far into the details: how an arch-foe said it was his left shoulder he always ducked a split second before he turned on the jets and blew by—'Even though I knew he was going to do it, I couldn't stop him.'

And how now the physical therapist rubs and massages his legs which are already starting to grow scrawny because of disuse, and those once telltale shoulders now have to be washed with antiseptic to prevent bed sores.

Details, details, details. The look on his mother's face when he isn't watching. The sound of the hammers as basketball players build a wheelchair ramp at their teammate's home, and the simple yet intimate ways they discuss what happened to him.

Features should be narratives, storytelling with lots of color, with soul and taste and feel. And even with delayed leads, they must capture an essence of the real story.

How do you write them? Watch, listen, feel, describe."

Here's some tips on how to write a feature:

## The Lede

Most feature stories use a **delayed lede**, in which you don't deliver the main information right away but instead begin with something else. Delayed ledes can be narratives, descriptions, anecdotes, or even quotations. They should make the reader interested in the story, and that's enough said about that. Most textbooks say you should "pull the reader in," but be careful with that advice soaked as we all are with media come-ons and teases that don't deliver anything at all. Sometimes deliberately trying to "pull the reader in" can lead to overwritten, lame, little vignettes that wouldn't pull in a tennis ball if the reader were a Golden Retriever.

It's better to say just plunge right in. Plunge in with a narrative, which begins the tale in chronological order. Or plunge in by establishing the conflict or challenge. Even direct ledes can be great. Find a writer whose work you admire and do what they do. One of the best ledes of all time was in a story about the Red Sox's march toward the pennant. The sportswriter described the team "stepping over the Yankees' carcass on its way to the playoffs." What a great choice of words.

The lede that is dreaded by editors and readers alike is the question lede because it's usually pointless: "Have you ever wondered what it would feel like to win the Kentucky Derby?" No, not really. But if I did wonder, I'd probably figure out fairly quickly that it feels great, like you just won a whole lot of money in front of a lot of screaming people. So if you must ask a question, be sure it's one for which you have a really good answer—something unusual, or truly interesting, or a laugh riot. For example: "Do you know what [Gloria Swanson](#) said to the agent inspecting her passport?"

"If I look like this," she said, "I need the trip."

## Story Structures

With a hard news story, you really can't go wrong with the old inverted pyramid structure. It works for you and your readers alike: They want to know what's going on, and you want to get them the information.

With features, though, you're really telling your readers a story. And indeed, that's how you should think of a feature story—not as a report or a newspaper article, but as a proper story. Yes, you'll be telling the truth without bias, and yes, you'll be writing tightly. But in a feature story, your reader should see characters and setting,

understand the conflict, feel the atmosphere and some suspense, and enjoy a beginning, middle, and end.

All sorts of narrative structures can help you craft such a compelling story. Here's a terrific and thorough description of the hourglass structure, with additional links to the "five boxes approach" and the "nut graf story" structures as well, from Chip Scanlan of the Poynter Institute.

You could also read the paper for a few days and cut out (or save on your computer) the feature stories you like most. How did the reporters craft them? Deconstruct the stories, and you'll find out. Figure out what's in the lede: Is it direct? Is it a narrative? A scene? What's in the next graf? And the next? Where do the quotes come in, and where is the central dilemma described? Write down precisely what's in each graf, and you'll see the story's structure. Notice the transitions and the repetition of certain words or images. Then use that excellent feature story as a model. And follow your instinct to tell your reader a compelling story.

## Some Mistakes to Avoid

Stories from an anonymous reporter:

When I wrote my first newspaper article, for *The Chronicle* at Duke University, I wrote a profile of a blond-haired basketball player from Texas named Tate Armstrong. I conducted the interview in the school dining hall, where Tate and I chatted over lunch. He ate fried shrimp. He put them in his mouth, and he chewed them, and in my article, I actually described this. Now, clearly I had gone awry. Maybe people would be interested to read what the guy ate for lunch. But that he chewed? Clearly not.

So writing something totally boring and pointless is one

way you can go awry when you're writing a feature story. There are several other ways as well.

You can err by turning a rich and complicated story into a cliché.

You can err by writing too many words that don't say a lot.

You can err by staying on the surface of things, describing only what anyone would see but what means very little—so the tree was 20 feet tall, so the ladder was aluminum, so the fireman climbed up the ladder using both hands (duh), so what? If the tree was 20 feet tall but very, very skinny and bending under the fireman's weight, okay; if the ladder was aluminum and slick from rain, okay; if the fireman climbed up the ladder using only *one* hand because in the other he held a tea cup and saucer with very hot Darjeeling tea (with which to coax the woman down from the limb), then ADD THE DETAIL. But if you offer pointless details, or if you just describe what anyone could see, you aren't contributing enough to the reader. It's your job to hunt for details others don't see, jot them in your notebook, evaluate them, and if they deserve to be included, describe them in your story.

And here's the worst mistake of all, the real skull-clutcher, which you must try your level best never to make: You must never write something that, while well written, you don't believe is absolutely true.

Let's deconstruct my hideous story about Tate Armstrong in order to consider this. What I should have written was: "At lunch, Tate ate a big plate of fried shrimp." That's a fairly boring sentence, but it's accurate. It gives specific information, which people like to read. I did consider writing, "He enjoyed them," because "enjoyed" is a verb with more life in it than "ate," but actually, to be perfectly honest, I couldn't really even say that Tate enjoyed the shrimp; he really didn't act one way or another about them. We were eating in the dining hall over blue plastic trays. The fact is that Tate might have actually hated the shrimp! He might

have been gagging them down in order to increase his protein intake, because Tate even back then was a nutrition nut who ate handfuls of enormous vitamins from the health food shop (which frankly was kind of a creepy place back then, because it was small and crowded and smelled of patchouli). We all gave Tate a lot of grief for his vitamin regimen because it was so crunchy granola for a big-time jock. (Granted, we were idiots, but in our defense, Tate really was ahead of his time.)

And anyway, where was I? I was talking about how I did the right thing in that story by hunting around for a strong verb—you should *always* hunt for the verb—but I ended up choosing poorly and writing that Tate chewed his shrimp. Boring, boring, boring. But at least I didn't make the bigger mistake of writing that he enjoyed them, because that might not have been true.

Bottom line: Had I been less dense as a young reporter and written a better profile of my friend Tate, I would have included the fried shrimp, because actually, people like to read about what other people eat, and also what they wear, and how they speak and gesture, and whether they squint or limp, and what their tattoo says, and so on and so forth (Tate did not have a tattoo, by the way, though this paragraph might imply he had—back then, most college kids didn't). In any event, in a profile—as in any news story—details are key, so you must gather them. And verbs are terrific, so you must fish around for them in your mind and use them in your writing. Just remember that at all times, your details and your verbs must matter to the story—to bringing your subject to life—and they must always, *always*, ALWAYS (you already know this!) reveal the truth.

## Exercises

1. Brainstorm a local folo (follow-up story). Read a news story about a national event, and come up with an idea for a folo

feature story that is local to your community. How does the national story affect the people or a person in your town? Think through the “story”: Who are the characters? What is the setting? What is the conflict?

2. Go to a public place in your town. Stay there for one hour, and do not say anything to anyone. Notice and write down or photograph details. What does the sign say? What color is the slide? What is someone wearing? Write down the things you hear and overhear. Find a story. You may have to be patient until one unfolds. Who’s the character? What’s the setting? What’s the conflict? What’s the beginning, middle, and end? Write a mini feature story from your observations.
3. Make a list of feature stories for your school or town. If you’re stuck on finding ideas, re-read Melissa Wantz’s story brainstorming tips.

# 16. Chapter 16: Photographing Interesting People in Your Community: A Guide to Taking Portraits (from the New York Times)

Follow these five steps to learn how to take photos that capture your subject's background and personality.



Paulina Alexis, an Indigenous Canadian actress, at a skate park on the Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation Reserve in Alberta, Canada.

A [profile of Ms. Alexis](#) appeared in The Times's Up Next series. Credit...Amber Bracken for The New York Times

By Kate Plows, Donna Schou and [Natalie Proulx](#)

Published Jan. 4, 2022 in the [New York Times Lesson Plans series](#), which provides free lesson plans, writing prompts and activities for students, all base on Times journalism.

What can a photograph reveal about someone's personality, background, work, hobbies or passions?

In this step-by-step guide to taking portraits, we'll show you how you can use the camera on your smartphone to tell a person's story.

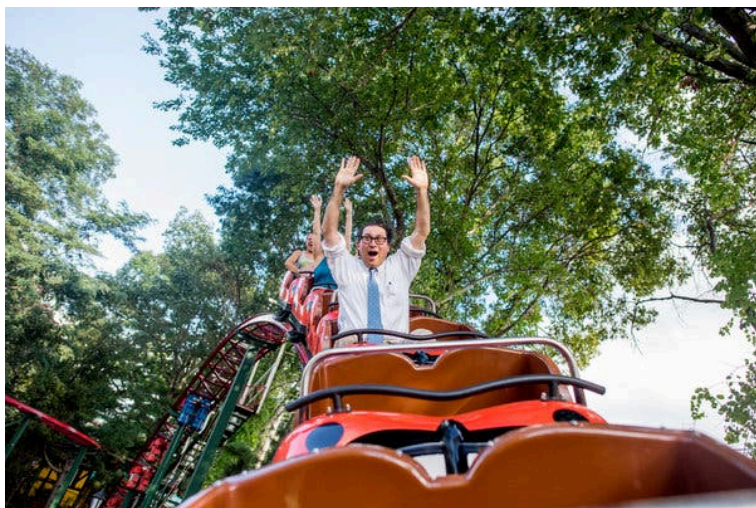
This is part of a suite of resources to help teachers and students participate in The Learning Network's first-ever [Profile Contest](#), which invites young people to choose an interesting person in their community to research, interview, photograph and write about. [Here you can find a similar guide to conducting an interview and shaping the results into a compelling Q. and A.](#) Both are designed for students and teachers who have no previous journalism or photography experience, though we hope many of the tips we offer will be useful to seasoned student journalists as well.

In this guide, we'll focus on "environmental portraits," and we'll show you plenty of examples from The New York Times – starting with the one at the top of this post. Then, we'll walk you through taking environmental portraits of your own. We'll teach you some basic composition tips; share advice from a Times photographer on how to conduct a photo shoot; make suggestions for selecting, editing and captioning your photos; and challenge you with a few activities for practicing all these skills as you go.

Questions? Let us know in the comments, or by writing to [LNFeedback@nytimes.com](mailto:LNFeedback@nytimes.com). We can't wait to see what you'll send us.

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## Step 1: Understand the ‘Environmental Portrait’



Credit...Johnny Milano for The New York Times

When you read profiles, you'll see that they are nearly always accompanied by photographs of the subject. These photos give readers important information about the person – information that can't always be conveyed in words alone.

This type of photo is called an **environmental portrait**. While a typical portrait focuses mainly on a person (often using a plain background and flattering lighting), an environmental portrait includes the person's surroundings, or environment. The location, the lighting, the angle and the items included within the frame all provide readers with vital visual clues about the subject.

Take a look, for example, at the photo above of Martin Lewison, who was profiled in The New York Times's [Character Study](#) column. What can you tell about Mr. Lewison from this photograph? What might his personality be like? What might be his interests or

hobbies? What kind of job do you think he has? What do you see in the photograph that makes you say that?

Now, read the first four paragraphs of [Mr. Lewison's profile](#). How close were your guesses?

Before you start planning how you're going to photograph the subject of the profile you are writing, let's take a look at a few more examples.

### **Activity: Guessing Game**

Try the exercise you just did with Mr. Lewison's photo with several other environmental portraits from Times profiles. First, select two of the [images in this PDF](#) to study closely. For each photo, list at least five things you can infer about the subject, as well as the clues in the photo that helped you draw those conclusions.

You might also try to guess the tone or mood of the profile based on the image. Do you think it is serious? Lighthearted? Inspiring? Something else? Why?

Here are some clues to consider as you view your selected images:

- The person's pose
- The person's expression
- The person's clothing
- The cropping of the photo (what the photographer chose to include or omit)
- The angle of the photo (where the photographer is standing in relation to the subject)
- Where the person's eyes are looking
- The lighting
- The framing (how the image ensures that the subject is the center of interest)
- Items in the photo
- The setting of the photo

After you've made your inferences, read the first few paragraphs of the profile by clicking the "Related Article" link below each photo. How close were your guesses?

Finally, share your opinion. How strong were the photos you chose? What drew you to them? What specific techniques worked well? Did the photos give you accurate clues as to who the person was and what the profile was about?

What, if anything, do you think the photographer could have done to make the photo stronger – either in technical terms or from a storytelling perspective? If you had taken the photo, what would you have done differently and why?

## Step 2: Learn Some Basic Photo Composition Techniques

What makes a strong environmental portrait? The answer to that question may in part be subjective, since what you like isn't necessarily what someone else likes. But when a photograph makes you more interested in a story or evokes an emotion, that usually has not happened by accident. Photojournalists use **composition techniques**, which involve the careful placement of the subject within a frame, to catch viewers' eyes and create images that have mean.

Here are six basic composition techniques you can try.

### 1. Rule of Thirds

When the subject of a photo is in the center of the frame, our eyes sometimes get stuck there, missing the rest of the storytelling details in the photo. The rule of thirds is a fundamental composition technique that guides photographers to place subjects *away* from the center of the shot.

Imagine a tic-tac-toe board placed over the frame of your photograph. This divides your frame into nine equal rectangles with

two vertical and two horizontal lines. The lines intersect at four points. Try to place your subject near one of these intersections. In portrait photography, aim to align the subject's eyes along one of the lines or at one of the intersection points. Even when you see a subject positioned in the center of the shot, the person's head or eyes will usually be aligned along one of the vertical or horizontal lines.



[Related Article](#) Credit...Rick Loomis for The New York Times



## 2. Angle

Approaching your subject from an angle that is different from the usual eye-level perspective can help to tell a powerful story. While shooting straight on is always an option, you might try to consider your subject from a different perspective.

For instance, photographs taken from a **worm's-eye angle** are captured from below, looking up at the subject. This angle can make your subject look bigger or more powerful. You can crouch down and aim upward, or even sit or lie on the ground for a dramatic shot.

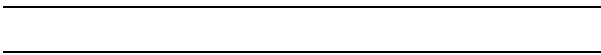


[Related Article](#)Credit...Brittany Newman for The New York Times



[Related Article](#)Credit...Jessica Lehrman for The New York Times

Photographs taken from a **bird's-eye angle** are captured from above the subject. This angle can imply a sense of power over the subject or make the subject look more diminutive. To capture a bird's-eye shot, stand on an elevated surface – like a chair, table or ladder – to aim your camera down at your subject.





[Related Article](#) Credit...Joshua Kissi for The New York Times



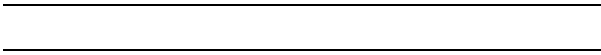
[Related Article](#)Credit...Elliott Verdier for The New York Times

### 3. Depth of Field

Photojournalists use depth of field to describe how much of the background is in sharp focus. When a photograph has a **shallow depth of field**, the subject is in sharp focus and most of the

background is blurred. A **wide depth of field** puts most of the scene in sharp focus.

As a photojournalist, you should carefully consider how important the background details are to your story. A shallow depth of field will focus attention on your subject, with the background providing a general sense of ambience or scene. If you want the viewer to notice important details of the background, consider a wide depth of field.



Shallow depth of field [Related Article](#)Credit...David W Cerny/  
Reuters



Wide depth of field [Related Article](#)Credit...Simon Simard for The New York Times

#### **4. Leading Lines**

Photojournalists know how to use natural lines in the setting to lead the viewer's eye into the photo and toward the subject. Common examples of leading lines include traffic lanes, architectural elements and any sort of path. Leading lines can also be implied, such as the direction of a subject's gaze.

Look for interesting lines in the environment and consider placing your subject where those lines direct or intersect. This technique often combines naturally with the rule of thirds.



[Related Article](#)Credit...Gabriela Bhaskar/The New York Times



[Related Article](#)Credit...Edu Bayer for The New York Times

## 5. Subframing

Subframing is the compositional technique of using a natural frame within the space of the photo – like a doorway, window or landscape elements – to accentuate the subject. The frame can add

helpful contextual information about the setting of the photo, as well as direct the viewer's attention to the subject.

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Once you start to notice subframes, you will see them everywhere. Architecture, trees, bodies and even shadows and light can create interesting subframes that help your viewer to notice the interesting context of your subject.



[Related Article](#)Credit...Reef Chang



[Related Article](#)Credit...Katherine Marks for The New York Times

## 6. Distance

Think about capturing your subject from varying distances. Photojournalists often take photos from wide, midrange and close-up distances. You can combine photos of different distances to tell a story.

Consider, for example, the three photos below from the article [“It’s Never Too Late to Ditch the City and Run a Farm,”](#) a profile of Martha Prewitt, a former opera singer who quit to run her family’s farm. The wide shot sets the scene, the midrange shot establishes Ms. Prewitt as the subject of the story and the close-up shot gives us insight into what her job on the farm is like.



Credit...Morgan Hornsby for The New York Times



Credit...Morgan Hornsby for The New York Times



Credit...Morgan Hornsby for The New York Times

**Activity: Scavenger Hunt**

You will see all of these composition techniques appear

throughout the photojournalism in The New York Times. See how many you can spot in a scavenger hunt.

Create a slide show of images from The Times that demonstrates each of the composition techniques you learned about above:

- Rule of thirds
- Angle (straight-on, worm's-eye and bird's-eye)
- Depth of field (shallow and wide)
- Leading lines
- Subframing
- Distance (wide, midrange and close-up shots)

On each slide, copy and paste an image that demonstrates the technique and describe how the technique is used. Additionally, explain how the technique contributes to the photograph's story. For example, if you were to explain how the use of a wide depth of field contributes to the story of the image of the man in the laboratory, you might say, "The photographer uses a wide depth of field so viewers can see all the details of the laboratory. These details show us that his job is probably in science and that it is complicated."

If you have a subscription to The New York Times, you can explore the website on your own. If not, you can hunt through the free articles below to find examples of each technique.

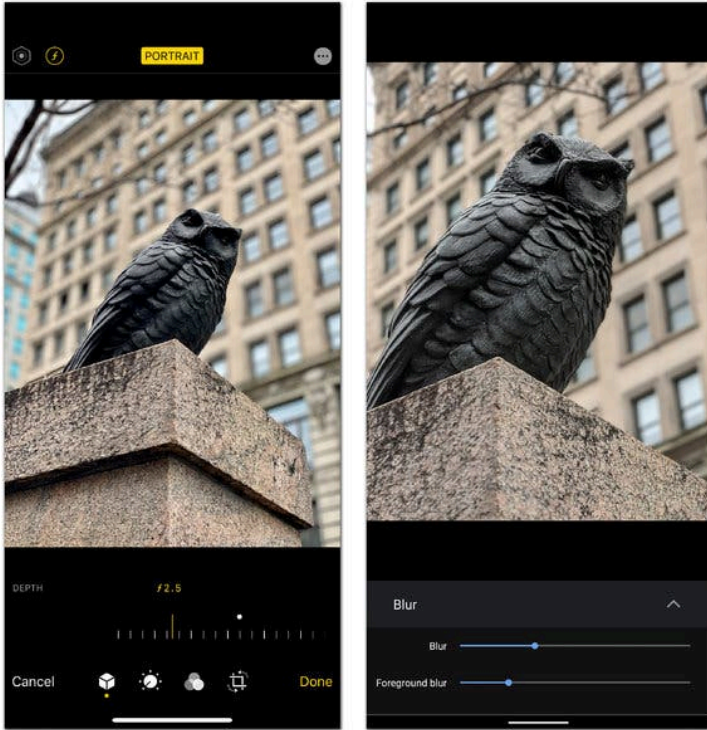
- [The Pin Chaser in Charge](#)
- [First Black Woman in Bundestag Wants to Change Image of 'Germanness'](#)
- [Magnus Inc.: The Business of Being World Chess Champion](#)
- [The Little Lad? Berries and Cream? Call It Performance Art.](#)
- [We Could All Use a Jodi in Our Lives](#)
- [The Exacting Art of Saxophone Repair](#)
- [In Finland, Turning Straw Into Magic](#)
- [It's Never Too Late to Climb That Mountain](#)

- [A Surprise Sports Hero Broadens Italy's Image of Itself](#)
- [Manhole Impressionist](#)
- [The Nigerian Activist Trying to Sell Plants to the Oil Company That Destroyed Them](#)
- [A Portrait of Gen Z: Winners of Our Second Annual Student Photo Contest](#)
- [Captivated by Her Yellow Glow](#)
- [How a Champion of Black Culture Spends Her Sundays](#)

### Step 3: Practice With the Tools on Your Smartphone

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Find more tips for taking photos with your phone in the article [“Get the Most Out of Your Fancy Smartphone Camera.”](#)Credit...The New York Times

Now that you know some composition techniques, it’s time to practice them.

There are many methods you could use to photograph your subject. If you are an experienced photographer, you might think about the “visual concept” of your profile and decide what kind of camera or technique you want to use to capture your subject. (We’ll explain this more in the next section.)

But we’re going to stick with a tool that most young people have access to: the camera on your smartphone.

Below, we share a few basic tips for achieving the effects you

learned about in Step 2. You can read “[Get the Most Out of Your Fancy Smartphone Camera](#)” for even more detailed advice.

- **Zoom with your feet.** You probably know how to zoom in with your smartphone by pinching the screen – but it is generally a good idea to avoid this and move closer to your subject instead. Digital zoom works by enlarging the pixels in your image, so capturing your image that way will often result in some pixelation.
- **Take time to focus.** The best photojournalism uses sharp focus to identify the subject of the shot. On a smartphone screen, tap on your subject to focus on this area of the image. Many smartphones now also have a “portrait mode” feature that keeps the subject in sharp focus while softening or blurring the background. As the photojournalist, you need to decide how much of the background of your environmental portrait is key to telling the story. If the viewer should notice important details in the setting, take care not to overuse portrait mode.
- **Compose your best shot.** Many smartphone cameras have a function that activates a grid on the camera screen to help you use rule of thirds to compose your shot. Go to the settings on your camera and select the grid option (make sure it is a nine-square grid). Remember to place the subject’s eyes near one of the intersections.
- **Make the most of lighting.** Photojournalists know how to take advantage of natural lighting whenever possible. Natural light is generally softer and more flattering than indoor fluorescents. If it makes sense for the story you are documenting, take your photographs outdoors. The first few hours of the morning and the last few hours before sunset often provide the most inviting light. If an indoor setting is most appropriate for your subject, consider how you can use the light from a window or doorway in your scene. When additional lighting is necessary to enhance your subject in a darker space, use soft bulbs, or even consider draping artificial

light with translucent fabric to soften the glare. You'll want the light in front of, not behind, your subject. Your smartphone camera allows you to increase or decrease the **exposure**, or brightness, of the shot. With an iPhone, tap on your subject on the screen, then use the slider to increase or decrease the exposure. On an Android phone, use the three-dot overflow button to find the square button with plus and minus signs. Tap the +1 or +2 to increase the exposure and the -1 or -2 to decrease it.

- **Turn your camera.** If you often take photos vertically, try to take a few shots horizontally and vice versa. This simple trick can help smartphone photographers be intentional about composition. Study the difference between portrait and landscape framing for your shots. Which direction tells the most complete story about your subject?

### **Activity: Practice, Practice, Practice**

To get familiar with your camera, practice taking photos that clearly demonstrate the various composition techniques you've learned. For an initial practice round, use a toy or other small object as your subject. Then practice with a willing family member or friend.

The biggest advantage to digital and smartphone photography is that you will never run out of film. So, with every decision you make about the composition of your photos, take multiple shots. If you adjust the subject's position, take several shots as you explore depth of field and exposure. If you change your angle or try a new composition guideline, shoot multiple photos as you zoom with your feet to get closer to and farther from your subject.

And, if you want to go further, attend a school or local event and practice taking photos on location. Shooting "in the field" is a great exercise to develop your eye for finding beautiful compositions in any environment.

## Step 4: Photograph Your Subject (With Tips From a Times Photographer)

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Todd Heisler, a Times photographer, photographing in Willets Point, Queens. [Related Article](#)Credit...Jeffrey Furticella/The New York Times

You know some composition techniques. You're familiar with the tools on your camera. Now you're ready to take photos of the subject of your profile.

The photo shoot involves more than going out and just snapping a few photos. In addition to thinking about the technical aspects of your photography, you'll also have to think about how to make your subject comfortable and how you can get creative to bring out the aspects of the person's personality and life story that are most important to your profile.

Below, we offer some questions to ask yourself before and during the photo shoot, along with advice from [Todd Heisler](#), a staff

photographer for The New York Times, adapted from what he told us on The Learning Network's [webinar on teaching profile writing](#). You can [watch the full webinar on demand](#) to hear even more of Mr. Heisler's tips.

### **Questions to Ask Yourself Before the Photo Shoot**

- *What is the focus of my profile?* You or your partner will need to conduct the interview, or at least talk to your subject, ahead of time to get some sense of who the person is and what is interesting about him or her. This information will help you determine the “visual concept” of your story, as well as where you'll photograph your subject. Mr. Heisler says that sometimes he and the reporter will go to the interview together. Other times, he'll read the reporter's story ahead of time so he knows what to focus on in his photography.
- *What is the visual concept of my profile?* Mr. Heisler says that he always asks himself: “What's the story? What kind of photographs do I want to make? What does it feel like?” For example, for a [story about the auto body shops of Willets Point, Queens](#), that had been around since the 1930s and were being cleared for development, the photographers, including Mr. Heisler, wanted to capture the shops' historical value. So, instead of digital photography, they decided to use 19th-century-style tintypes to “create an authentic, respectful portrait of a gritty, bygone part of New York City.”
- *Where is the best place to photograph my subject to tell the story?* You will want to get photos of subjects in their environments. Take a look at these [photos of service workers](#) – cabdrivers, movers, chefs and housekeepers – at the places they work to see examples. Mr. Heisler says he usually doesn't want people to completely clear their schedules for him. “There's nothing worse than knowing that I want to make photographs about what somebody's day is like, and I show up and they say, ‘Well, I cleared all my activities for the day so we could spend time together.’ Then, it's somebody sitting on the

couch all day, which is not what I want.”

## Questions to Ask Yourself During the Photo Shoot

- *Where specifically might the photographs happen?* Once Mr. Heisler gets on location, he said, he thinks about framing, composition, and, most important, lighting. He asks himself: “If it’s a portrait, where would I put them? How does the light hit their face?” And he asks his subjects: “Where are you comfortable? What is meaningful to you?” If possible, you might take some photos in the environment from different perspectives before the subject arrives. Remember, every item matters in an environmental portrait, so move things you don’t want in the shot out of the way. Try also to keep an eye on what’s in the background so that nothing appears to be sticking out of the subject’s head.
- *How can I make my subject comfortable?* As Mr. Heisler phrased it in our webinar: “Showing up, I’m a stranger, coming into this strange place. You have to get in with people.” Once your subject is in the perfect spot, put your camera down and talk to him or her. What’s the person’s story? Can you find something you have in common to talk about? Then start shooting *while* you continue to talk to your subject. Take photos when he or she is thinking of an answer to a question, or laughing. You’re trying to get the person to relax and enjoy the process while you capture genuine expressions that feel comfortable, not forced. And, remember, you are in charge. Your subject will be trusting you to tell him or her if something doesn’t look right. Don’t be afraid to ask your subject to move, but don’t touch the person. Show directions by using hand gestures.
- *How can I tell the story of this person?* Mr. Heisler suggests thinking about this in a variety of ways. “If this is something where I can tell the story in multiple photographs, I’m thinking about details. I’m thinking about, ‘What is a sense of place?’ ...

And then moving in a little closer, ‘What is the person like?’ And trying to find some expression, or a moment: some action.” See how Mr. Heisler strikes that balance in the article [“A Rock Star’s Next Act: Making Montana a Skateboarding Oasis.”](#) He said he made sure to capture the scenery surrounding the skate park because the location, Montana, was an important part of the story. Consider how you can use the compositional techniques you learned to bring out your subject’s personality. For example, if your subject is a woodworker, maybe you want to have some close-ups of the person’s hands doing their craft. If the person is an important community member, you can make him or her look powerful by shooting with a worm’s eye angle.

- *How can I keep my photographs interesting?* Take lots of shots and move around, Mr. Heisler suggests. “Try to make a photograph in a way you’re not used to doing it,” he said. “If you’re used to hitting something from a certain angle, get up and try it from the other side and just see how the light plays.

### **Activity: Photo Shoot**

Put everything that you’ve learned so far into practice. Pick a place and time that works for you and your subject (remember to consider natural lighting when determining the time of the shoot).

Then, take a series of photos of your subject. Experiment with various angles, framing, props, positions and actions that show different expressions or different sides of the person’s personality. Take as many shots as you can: The more photos you have to choose from as you begin to select your best shots and edit, the better your final photojournalism project will be.

If possible to do it safely – for example, outdoors or masked – we hope you’ll photograph your subject in person. But if not, this [Times Insider article from a Times photographer](#) has advice on how to shoot in a socially distant way without sacrificing intimacy.

## Step 5: Choose, Edit and Caption the Photos for Your Profile

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Margaret Kivelson, a physicist who was featured in The Times's Profiles in Science column. [Related Article](#)Credit...Jenna Schoenefeld for The New York Times

Now that you've taken a variety of photographs of your subject, you will need to select and edit the ones you want to use for your profile. If you are submitting to our Profile Contest, you must include at least one photo in your profile, and you can include up to three.

### **Selection**

As you select the photos you want to include, consider the story you want them to tell about your subject. Because these photos are for a profile, at least one of them should clearly show your subject's face. For the others, you might consider how you can use distance – like a wide shot to show the environment or a close-up to show

more intimate details – to reveal the most important aspects of the person’s story.

You should also consider tone. Is the subject you are writing about serious? Lighthearted? Inspiring? Gritty? The lighting, the colors and the subject’s expression and movement will all contribute to the mood you are trying to create

### **Editing**

Once you have selected your photos, you will need to edit them. Your editing should focus on enhancing the quality of the photo, but you should not alter the reality of the photo in any way. Here are some things to consider:

- *Crop carefully.* In an environmental portrait, every part of the picture is important. Crop your photos carefully to eliminate any space that doesn’t help tell the story. You can also use cropping to cut out distracting background information. Consider the photo above of Margaret Kivelson, a physicist, from her 2018 [feature in Profiles in Science](#). Although there was probably much more to see along the campus street, the photographer, Jenna Schoenefeld, cropped this shot to frame Ms. Kivelson along the rule of thirds and to eliminate any space that did not contribute to the story. It is generally a good idea to use a standard aspect ratio when cropping. Most smartphone cameras have ratios like 1:1 (square), 7:5, 4:3, 16:9 and others embedded in the cropping tool. Cropping to a standard aspect ensures that your photo will fit in standard publication guides or frames.
- *Consider photojournalism ethics.* Since the photos for your profile story are journalistic, they should present an accurate representation of your subject without any tricks or manipulation. Please keep digital manipulation and postprocessing to a minimum. (That is, you may use editing software for minor corrections such as one might make in a darkroom – like cropping, adjusting brightness and balancing

colors – but please do not alter the reality of the photo in any way.) If you are using a camera phone, please do not use filter effects. Submit your photos as individual images, not as collages or photo illustrations. Review the section on Photography and Imagery in The New York Times’s [Guidelines on Integrity](#) to ensure your photos meet these important standards.

- *Use editing tools thoughtfully.* There are many photo editing tools at your fingertips on a smartphone or personal computer. Simple built-in tools on your smartphone’s camera can adjust exposure and contrast, brighten the shadows or soften the highlights, or even enhance a photo’s sharpness. Apps like Snapseed and Lightroom Mobile add even more options to your editing toolbox.

### **Captions**

Photojournalists use captions to describe the storytelling details of their photos. A caption usually includes information about the “Five W’s” of each photo – who, what, when, where and why. Include details that are most important to your story.

A caption should usually explain what readers cannot see for themselves in the picture and omit the obvious. For example, the top photo in [this Times profile](#) of David Reich has a detailed caption that describes what the technician is doing – a process that is not obvious from the photograph.

Kate Plows teaches media arts and coaches the yearbook at Strath Haven High School in Wallingford, Pa. She was a member of the 2020–21 cohort of The New York Times Teaching Project.

Donna Schou teaches photography at Lynnwood High School in Bothell, Wash. She previously worked as a professional photographer. She was a member of the 2020–21 cohort of The New York Times Teaching Project.

Natalie Proulx joined The Learning Network as a staff editor in 2017

after working as an English language arts teacher and curriculum writer.

**Activity: Select, edit, and caption your photos.**

Choose and edit the one to three photos you would like to include in your profile.

To make sure the subject of your profile comes across the way you want him or her to in your photos, you might try an exercise like the one you did in Step 1 of this lesson. Share your photo selections with a partner and have him or her try to guess some attributes of your subject. Is your partner able to infer some information about your subject's personality or the focus of your profile? The guesses don't have to be 100 percent correct, but they should be fairly close.

If your partner's guesses are way off, or she or he doesn't feel like there are enough visual clues to make a guess, return to your pool of photos and see if you can find others that better represent your subject.

Finally, once you have your final selections, add a one-sentence caption to each photo explaining the image.

# 17. Chapter 17: Social Media

## NYU Journalism Handbook for Students

### [NYU Journalism Handbook for Students](#)

Ethics, Law and Good Practice

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Carter Journalism Institute  
Faculty of Arts and Science  
New York University  
20 Cooper Square  
New York, NY 10003

By Prof. Adam L. Penenberg

**REVISED 2020**

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## SOCIAL MEDIA

You are what you tweet or post on Facebook or Instagram. By that we mean you become a public figure when you participate on social media, what you say there reflects on you and social media mistakes can exist in perpetuity on the internet, revealed with a simple search or through the Wayback Machine. Every publication has its own rules governing staff use of social media. The Washington Post prohibits conduct on social media that “adversely affects The Post’s customers, advertisers, subscribers, vendors, suppliers or partners” and its management claims the right to take disciplinary action “up to and including termination of employment.” Bloomberg tells its staff not to join groups on social networks dedicated to a particular political opinion or cause and to not argue with those critical of its work. NPR wants reporters and editors to conduct themselves on social media just as they would in any other public circumstances. “Treat those you encounter online with fairness, honesty and respect, just as you would offline” and “do not disparage the work of others.”

If you post malicious, immature or prurient material, or engage in online trolling or acrimonious back and forth, you could inadvertently undermine your credibility and ethical standing.

On social media, you’re your own fact-checker – especially when sharing content from another user. You should vet information before passing it along over social media. Journalists have a responsibility not to add to the cloud of false information that is floating about. Just by retweeting or reposting a piece of information, in the eyes of many you are effectively reporting that information. When in doubt, verify. If a journalist amplifies something over social media that turns out to be false, they should correct the record. A rule of thumb: since everything you write online is, in effect, published, the NYU Journalism faculty urges you not to write anything that violates the rules of honest and decent journalism.

In an era when journalists are often accused of promulgating “fake news,” it’s critical that when journalists are using platforms for their reporting including social media, chatrooms and forums (e.g. Reddit, 4chan, 8chan, QAnon etc.) they verify their sources and information from these sites. It’s extremely important to be skeptical about all information and sources uncovered on these sites, because in most cases, the sites are intended to troll people. Don’t use anonymous message boards as primary sources. Keep in mind that some users of these sites are dangerous (or at very least, racist, sexist and homophobic), so try to keep a low profile.

# 18. Chapter 18: Privacy vs. The Public's Right to Know

## NYU Journalism Handbook for Students

### NYU Journalism Handbook for Students

Ethics, Law and Good Practice

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Carter Journalism Institute  
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## PRIVACY VS. THE PUBLIC'S RIGHT TO

## KNOW

A question journalists often confront is how much of a person's private life should be revealed in an article. Just because a reporter can pull up a source's mortgages, stock holdings, or perform a Google Earth flyover of their home doesn't mean that's ethical practice. It also doesn't necessarily mean it's unethical either. The key is whether a person's private life—his personal habits, sexual preference, medical condition, odd interests—is newsworthy and should therefore be published. These can be vexing decisions to make.

People who feel that their privacy has been invaded can sue in a privacy tort action under what is sometimes known as “embarrassing private facts.” The court's balancing of interests between a person's privacy and freedom of the press can be helpful as well to journalists making ethical decisions whether to publish private facts. In a privacy suit, the plaintiff must prove that the revealed facts were highly offensive to a reasonable person, sometimes defined as “morbid and sensational prying into private lives for its own sake.” But newsworthiness is a defense in privacy actions. How do courts [define newsworthiness](#)? Look closely at the social value of such information. Does the private information reasonably relate to matters of concern to people in the community? Does it relate to a subject of general interest?

If you are writing about a gay bar destroyed in a fire, do you release the names of deceased patrons? What if you learn a homemaker in the community had been a prostitute many years earlier. Do you run it? If a woman accuses a man of rape do you publish his name if charges haven't been filed, and do you investigate the sexual history of the woman making the allegations? If a local judge rents a porn video, is that news?

Some real life examples:

- In April 1992, *USA Today* contacted retired tennis star Arthur

Ashe to confirm a rumor he was HIV-positive, which Ashe, who had been infected by tainted blood during heart surgery several years earlier, had tried to keep secret. When Ashe couldn't convince editors to drop the story, he held a press conference to announce it himself. Although many believed this was an invasion of Ashe's privacy, the newspaper justified its actions by claiming a "conspiracy of silence has not served the public."

- Oliver Sipple became a hero in September 1975 for helping thwart an assassination attempt on then President Gerald Ford. In the ensuing press coverage, he was outed as being gay and his mother disowned him.

The internet adds an ever-increasing number of ways to expose people—with potentially embarrassing facts reappearing on searches for years. The NYU Journalism Institute faculty believes that privacy should never be taken lightly and recommends that student reporters not inquire into sources' personal lives unless doing so is relevant to the story they are researching. The fact that a local politician has patronized a gay bar might be their private business; the fact that a local politician known for anti-gay stances had patronized that bar might be the public's business.

### **DOXING**

Dox or doxing (or doxxing) is defined as the act of posting or publishing private information (such as a person's home address, phone number, social security number and medical records) often as form of punishment or revenge. It is a neologism that springs from the slang expression "dropping dox" (for docs or documents), which itself originated with 1990s hacker culture.

In 2012 Gawker writer Adrian Chen outed an anonymous reddit troll called violentacrez, who was an active poster to a subreddit that sexualized young girls, which Chen called a "fountain of racism, porn, gore, misogyny, incest, and exotic abominations yet unnamed." As a result, violentacrez, whose real name is Michael

Brutsch, was fired from his job as a computer programmer and himself became victim of harassment. Chen faced significant backlash from members of the reddit community, who accused him of doxing Brutsch. Others, such as technology reporter Farhad Manjoo, claimed this kind of doxing was simply “reporting.”

Sometimes people have good reasons for maintaining anonymity online. For example, they may fear for their safety. Other times they don’t—abusers like violentacruz/Michael Brutsch, who hide behind the cloak of anonymity to act with impunity.

The disclosing of private information isn’t new. Screw magazine publisher Al Goldstein would publish the names and phone numbers of people who he believed had crossed him, knowing that his fans would make life for them difficult. It isn’t even an American conceit. In the 1990s, Lord Herman Ouseley, who campaigned for race relations in the UK, received countless late night phone calls after far right activists inked his number on cards and left them in public toilets around London.

From the perspective of a journalist, it is an oft-misused and misapplied term. Just publishing a person’s real identity isn’t, strictly speaking, doxing, yet that is how some view the practice. The key is to determine the news value of publishing someone’s identity versus the harm that could come from it.

### **MASQUERADING**

The vast majority of the time journalists should make clear to the people they are interviewing that they are journalists. State your name and affiliation up front; i.e., Jane Smith, Carter Institute of Journalism at New York University, and your purpose in contacting a source. In highly unusual circumstances there may be good reasons for not identifying oneself as a journalist. For example, if observing police officers interactions with protestors at a rally, or reviewing a restaurant or videotaping counterfeit merchandise in New York’s Chinatown, identifying yourself as a reporter may not be appropriate since it could affect the type of treatment (or quality of food) you receive. Likewise, if conducting an undercover

assignment, especially if outing oneself as a reporter could result in potential harm. But these are rare examples.

### **THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

Often reporters scour discussion threads, message boards, forums and online communities seeking ideas and information without identifying themselves as journalists. It may be permissible to cite the information if it shows, say, how some YouTube users reacted to a specific video on the site. Obviously it is not always necessary for a journalist to identify themselves in that circumstance. But if a reporter wishes to use information from a forum/chatroom, email chain or other online sources, they should be mindful that deception is endemic to the internet. If at all possible, the reporter should attempt to contact the person who posted the information, identify themselves as a reporter, and try to persuade the source to provide full identification.

### **UNDERCOVER REPORTING**

Going undercover is a time-honored tradition in American journalism. Done well, it can help nail corrupt politicians and cops on the take, expose fraud and racism, and shed light on the plight of women in repressive societies. Done unethically, it can violate a citizen's privacy through unwarranted surveillance and intrusion into people's private business, and erode public trust. As a society would we want reporters functioning as a sort of auxiliary police trying to catch our transgressions?

Before engaging in any undercover work for a class assignment, consult your professor. Carefully consider whether your reporting could violate criminal or civil law (See the Legal section for more information). Weigh the potential harm involved. Could relying on subterfuge get you arrested? Could it lead to violence? Does it invade someone's privacy, especially in a non-public area like a home or an office? Are there laws in your state against recording without a person's permission, or specifically against using hidden cameras? Might it undermine the validity of your story? These are serious questions to consider.

*The San Francisco Chronicle* applies three tests to undercover assignments before editors will give the go ahead:

- Is the resulting news story or photograph of such vital public interest that its news value outweighs the potential damage to trust and credibility?
- Can the story be recast to avoid the need to conceal one's identity in gathering the information?
- Have all other reasonable means of getting the story been exhausted?

### **WRITING ABOUT CHILDREN**

Reporters should seek permission from a parent or guardian before interviewing children on any controversial subject. Getting a quote from a 12-year-old on the opening of a new swimming pool would not require such permission – as long as you only use the child's first name; getting a quote on allegations that a school is unsafe would. If you're planning on using a child's full name, you should get permission. When the call seems close, the reporter should discuss with a faculty member (or editor in a professional setting) in advance to determine the ethical course.

# 19. Chapter 19: Covering Death, Suicide and Other Challenging Situations

There are lots of challenging situations that can arise for journalists. That can range from covering natural disasters and seeing people in the middle of traumatic situations, to reporting on crime, to covering death and suicide.

Student journalists and all journalists struggle with making these decisions and figuring out how to navigate very challenging situations.

## Resources

Classmates, Pinnacle editors, instructor, Joelle Milholm, and Pinnacle advisor, Andrea Mason. We are all in this together – a small, but mighty crew. There are also amazing guides from institutions like the [Society of Professional Journalists \(Code of Ethics\)](#), the [Student Press Legal Association](#), the Associated Press Style Guide (like [Topical Guides](#) and its [Blog](#)), [the NYU Journalism Handbook for Students](#), the [Poynter Institute](#) (especially [the Lead blog on student journalism](#)), the [Scholastic Press Rights Committee](#), [PEN America](#), and more. This is an intro to reporting class and we are in the midst of a lot of changes in the journalism program at ACC, so we are learning a lot of these things together.

## Press Freedoms and Media Law

Thanks to a strong First Amendment, court cases like [New York Times v. Sullivan](#), [Near v. Minnesota](#), [New York Times v. United States](#) (Pentagon Papers), and more, journalists usually have the law on their side when they have truth on their side.

Defamation, damaging one's reputation, is hard to prosecute because people, organizations, or government entities that file lawsuits have to prove slander (spoken words of limited reach) or libel (written – or broadcast – words ) has [actual malice](#), meaning harm was intended or the result of negligence. This helps for accidental mistakes like with the recent Sarah Palin lawsuit (she sued the NYT for harming her reputation when an editorial linked her political action committee [with the 2011 shooting of former Rep. Gabby Giffords of Arizona](#).” However, she lost ([CNBC article](#)).

For more on media law, [check out the law entry from one of our OER Textbooks](#).

## Situations

We are going to be thinking through some of these kinds of situations and talking about different ways to handle different situations. Often, these are not black and white issues. The first priority has to be accuracy. The more we are careful and accurate with reporting, the better we'll be. The hard part comes in ethical and editorial decisions, which is often in the gray area. When it comes to death, there are lots of decisions to think about from making sure information is accurate and public, when to use or omit names of the deceased, what approach to take on articles (hard news vs. feature), making sure the headline matches the content of the article, what to do for a photo, and more.

AP policy on reporting suicides, spelled out in the AP Stylebook, is [“to not go into detail on the methods used.”](#)

From the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) [webpage “What the Codes Say: Code provisions by subject”](#)

### **Elements of Newsworthiness**

1. Timeliness
2. Proximity
3. Conflict
4. Reader Impact
5. Prominence
6. Rarity
7. Human Interest

Examples of a found body in a public place:

[Man Found Dead at Heritage High School](#) (name vs. not name, public place, not saying suicide)

1. The story is newsworthy because a body was found in a public place. Proximity: In ACC’s service area and with a school connected to the college. Community issue and the community deserves to know. The article was accurate and solidly reported.

2. The high school has already disclosed the information to students, their families, and staff. They put the information out there, but without a lot of the information that the community needs to know because there was an open investigation. It’s journalists’ jobs to get that info to the public.

3. The family had already posted the information on Facebook. They made it public first. They can be mad at the situation, but social media is public. (We could link to this post).

4. The story was written with public information – with info from Littleton Police, the Arapahoe County Corner (twice, waiting to make sure it was public), and LPS. The story withholds the off-the-record suicide.

5. Public deaths do not require permission or comment from family before it's published. It's not even common/expected.

Other examples:

[Badly decomposed body found in woods near elementary school identified](#)

[Body of 16-year old boy discovered on grounds of elementary school in Mat-Su](#)

[Body Found In Parking Lot Of Rochester School](#)

Things to consider:

*Minimizing harm*

Reporters should use special care when interviewing people who don't regularly deal with the press. The rules that govern conversations with politicians and public relations people don't necessarily apply when you're interviewing a victim's neighbor or a parent angry about school boundaries. A reporter might not – should not – hesitate to embarrass a politician for uttering something truly brainless on the record. A plain, ordinary citizen in those circumstances can be granted some leeway and extra courtesy.

– Daily Press, Newport News, Virginia

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Be certain that any contacts related to a death are handled with care and sensitivity. We seek the cause of death for news obituaries, but that information can be withheld if the family requests it and our editors approve. Discuss with your editor whether we should report

suicides, which we would do normally only if it involves a public figure or public suicide.

- The Dallas Morning News

Go to [SPJ Ethics Case Studies](#) to see numerous challenging situations.

## **Dealing With Fallout – Online Comments and Harassment**

One big thing to think about and be aware of is how the public might respond to articles. Sometimes criticisms and blowback will be warranted and sometimes it will be outrageous and completely out of line. The online commenting world and discord in society right now isn't the best and it's good for us all to know what to be aware of and possible ways of coping. PEN America, an amazing organization that helps fight for press and writing freedoms, has a guide for being a journalist in a hostile world in a webpage titled [ONLINE HARASSMENT FIELD MANUAL](#):

[Prepare for Online Abuse](#)

[Respond to Online Abuse](#)

[Practicing Self-Care](#)

[Legal Considerations](#)

[Requesting and Providing Support](#)

[What is Online Abuse?](#)

# 20. Chapter 20: Best Practices and Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide

## Media Plays an Important Role in Preventing Suicide

- Over 100 studies worldwide have found that risk of contagion is real and responsible reporting can reduce the risk of additional suicides.
- Covering suicide carefully can change perceptions, dispel myths and inform the public on the complexities of the issue.
- Media reports can result in help-seeking when they include helpful resources and messages of hope and recovery

Check out more guidelines and resources from [Reporting on Suicide](#).

# 21. Chapter 21: Self-Care Tips for Journalists

There are many things journalists can do to improve their mental health. We share some practical tips from Dr. Elana Newman, research director at the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma at Columbia University.

Published by [Journalist Resource](#) by [Naseem S. Miller](#) | July 1, 2021 |

For decades now, [researchers have documented](#) the impact of journalists' work on their mental health, even though there has been little discussion of it in newsrooms until recently. A string of mass shootings in recent years brought journalists' mental health to the forefront. Then came 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, a contentious presidential election and [growing vitriol toward journalists](#).

There may be a silver lining to the traumatic year that last year was. There are signs that the topic of journalists' mental health is becoming less taboo.

More reporters are [speaking out about](#) mental health. And more journalism conferences are dedicating panels to the topic. The Investigative Reporters & Editors' annual conference, held virtually this year in June, for instance, had two panels focused on the issue: "[Coping with Trauma](#)" and "[Conversation on Mental Health](#)." The organization has been highlighting the topic at previous conferences. And it dedicated the [Q3 2020 edition of The Investigative Reporters & Editors Journal](#) to journalists' mental health. (The issue is free to IRE members.)

“I’ve been doing this for 20 years and I think more and more people are studying [journalism and trauma] and more people are looking at it,” said [Dr. Elana Newman](#), research director at the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma at Columbia University, during the “Coping with Trauma” panel discussion, which I moderated.

Paying attention to journalists’ mental health is important to prevent burnout and ensure the overall well-being of reporters and editors, who are doing more with fewer resources.

“One of the reasons that I became a journalist ally and do this work is because you can effect change by stories you break at levels that can change the world,” said Newman, a clinical psychology professor at the University of Tulsa. “Not everybody listens, but it really is important work.”

To be sure, journalists are resilient. But there’s a psychological toll to covering tragic events, whether it’s a global pandemic, local crime stories or the recent [collapse of a condo building](#) in South Florida.

[Historically](#), journalists haven’t talked much about the stress and trauma they’ve experienced as part of their job. There are several reasons for this, including the stigma attached to mental illness and the traditional tough-it-out newsroom culture. Some journalists may think that they’re alone in experiencing stress and don’t speak about it. And some may feel guilty about experiencing the trauma of stories they cover, because the event didn’t happen to them.

“I think that, as journalists, your mission is to cover other people, and your focus is on other people,” Newman told the audience in the IRE discussion. “And so, it is sort of a professional obstacle to focus on yourself.”

But it is OK to not feel OK when covering traumatic events, because even though bearing witness to a tragedy is not the same as experiencing that tragedy, it can have an impact on journalists’ mental well-being.

Newman said the concept of experiencing a traumatic event has been redefined to include first responders, including journalists.

“This isn’t a competition,” said Newman.

Depending on their beats or work locations, [4%](#) to [59%](#) of

journalists have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, according to the [Dart Center](#), which advocates for better media coverage of trauma and researching the psychological impact of reporting on traumatic events.

## Taking care of yourself

There are many things journalists can do – regardless of whether or not they receive appropriate support from newsroom leaders – to better care for themselves.

Self-care might be an overused term, but there's science behind it.

“Technically, the definition is the practice of taking action to preserve or improve one's own health,” said Newman. “Some of us are good exercisers. Some are good meditators. Some are good at making social plans or watching movies. We all have our own things. And we should be trying to have healthy habits. That's in general – but you're never going to be perfect. The goal here is to think about what are some things you can do to enhance your health.”

Here are the self-care measures Newman recommended:

**Breathe.** “When you get tense, simply remembering to breathe helps,” she said.

**Take small breaks during your workday.** Set up a timer on your phone or computer as a reminder to get up from your desk. Maybe take a walk. Grab a cup of tea or coffee. [Studies](#) have shown that small mental breaks can help with focus.

**After big stories, take big breaks.** Take a day off after finishing a large investigative story and before you move on to the next story or project. “Having a little bit of a break is one of the things that we found is helpful in reducing stress,” Newman said.

**Remember your mission and purpose.** Write a short mission statement and post it where you can see it regularly – to remind

yourself why you do the work you do and why you're pursuing the story, Newman said.

**Have rituals to end your day.** “During the pandemic, everything has been blurring and there's been no boundaries,” Newman said. Shut down your computer at the end of the day. If you live in a small apartment, cover your computer, even if you use it later to watch a movie. Another option: light a candle so that your house smells different from when you're working.

“Some people take showers. Some people say some words,” Newman said. “Everybody has a different way of doing those kinds of things, but creating some routines and rituals around your work is important because [news stories] never stop.”

**Get good sleep.** Here are [some tips](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day, including weekends; remove electronic devices, including TV and smart phones, from your bedroom; don't eat a large meal and don't drink alcohol or caffeine before bedtime; and get more exercise.

**Disconnect from your email when you can.** “The people who do best with technology, in general, are people who see it as a tool and they are not controlled by it,” Newman said. Look at disconnecting as recovery time, just like a weightlifter needs days off between weight lifting sessions, she said. During your weekends or time off, look for a different kind of challenge or do an activity that invigorates you.

**Mentally prepare for covering tough stories.** When working on a difficult story, think about what's going to be problematic for you, said Newman.

“Can you think ahead of time what parts of this might be stressful to you, and if so, what would be a good plan for you to do?” Newman asked. “What's helped you when you've been through a difficult time before? What are the signature strengths and skills that you've used that have helped you through a hard time? What are the things you've done that have been less healthy? Have you drunk too much or eaten too much? Then think about upping the things that were

helpful to you and doing a little less of the things that were less helpful to you.”

## Building resilience

“One of the things that keeps people resilient is remembering why you do the work you do and the importance of it,” said Newman. Newsroom managers should convey that to the newsroom constantly. Complimenting reporting teams for the work they do is important, she said.

Some other things journalists can do to build resilience:

**Build a supportive community**, whether it’s at work with colleagues or at home with friends and family.

If you’re on social media, connect to groups where you can interact with like-minded people. I run a Facebook group called [Journalists Covering Trauma](#), where we share information about self-care and journalists’ mental health. There are other Facebook groups like [Journalism and Trauma](#) and the [Canadian Journalism Forum on Violence and Trauma](#).

**Give emotional support.** Giving support is just as effective for building resiliency as receiving it, Newman said. Ask colleagues how they’re doing. If you’re worried about someone and have a close enough working relationship, say, “Hey, I’m worried about you. What can I do? Is there anything you need?” Newman said.

**Do good work.** Being ethical is a sign of resilience. Being a good journalist is itself being resilient, Newman said.

**Cultivate optimism.** “Many journalists are cynical by nature and when you do investigations, I think you’re particularly skeptical,” Newman said. “But you can be skeptical about things and still foster optimism.”

At the end of the day, write down two things you’re grateful for. They don’t have to be major happy events. “They’re like something

decent that happened that day and I found that it was counter to my skepticism,” she said.

**Have some sense of connectedness to the world.** It could be through religion, spirituality or nature. Nurture the feeling of being part of something larger than yourself.

Building resilience does take effort and it needs practice – just like your craft, said Newman.

## Signs of trouble

If you're not able to do the work you're assigned, cannot concentrate in a sustained way or are on edge all the time, that's a signal that you may need assistance from a mental health professional, Newman said.

If you're no longer able to feel compassion for your sources, that's also a sign that you may need some help.

“I think it's fine to not feel the emotion of your sources. That's healthy,” she said. “But if you're feeling numb and not caring and not able to get into understanding their story, that's a sign that one needs help.”

Monitor yourself and be aware of your emotions, she added.

The Dart Center has a [guide](#) on finding a therapist. This month, it launched the [Journalist Trauma Support Network](#) to train therapists on journalists' work and culture so that they can better help journalists. The program is in its pilot phase, during which therapists will start working with a small number of journalists, matched on a confidential basis by the Committee to Protect Journalists, according to the support network.

For additional resources, including vetted self-care apps, please see [this tip sheet](#) that I put together for the IRE conference, with guidance from Newman. The tip sheet is also included below, after this brief break of puppies, kittens and a fox.

# A list of self-care resources for journalists

## *Self-care*

- [Self-Care Tips for News Media](#) (Dart Center): “These tips are offered as suggestions only, to assist in fostering healthier newsrooms and better journalism. They are based on research findings on well-being and resilience and the practical experience of news professionals in the field.”
- [Safety and Self-Care Strategies for Every Beat](#) (Dart Center): Video, where a “panel introduced safety, security and self-care strategies that should be in every reporter’s toolkit, for assignments ranging from neighborhood beats to disasters, mass shootings, and investigative projects.”
- [Mindfulness Training for Journalists](#) (Dart Center): On September 10, 2015, “the Dart Center hosted a special half-day workshop on mindfulness practice, led by teachers from the monastic community founded by poet, author and activist Thich Nhat Hanh.”
- [Chair Yoga for Journalists](#) (Dart Center): “This 11 min. chair yoga by former foreign correspondent Kimina Lyall, Deputy Director, Dart Centre Asia Pacific is for media practitioners working at their desks or working from home. You do not need to be a yoga practitioner.”
- [How journalists can take care of themselves while covering trauma](#) (Poynter): “Journalists can’t properly cover trauma if they’re suffering themselves – here’s a guide to self-care.”
- [Under Pressure: Coping with stress, and knowing you’re not alone](#): A tip sheet compiled by Ken Armstrong, senior reporter at ProPublica.
- [6 tips for protecting your mental health when reporting on trauma](#) (International Journalists’ Network): “The following techniques may help journalists build [their] own resiliency

and learn how to report sensibly on trauma-related issues.”

### *Getting help*

- [Choosing a Psychotherapist](#) (Dart Center): A guide for journalists seeking therapy for personal or work-related issues.
- [The Journalist Trauma Support Network](#): A pilot program training therapists to help journalists.
- [U.S. Journalism Emergency Fund and Black Journalists Therapy Relief Fund](#) (International Women’s Media Foundation): “The International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF) is partnering with the Black Journalists Therapy Relief Fund for this joint effort to provide emergency funding to Black journalists.”
- [AAPI Journalists’ Financial Assistance for Mental Wellness](#): “This fund, created in partnership with AAJA, is designed to provide financial assistance specifically for AAPI journalists to help you get the support you need during this time. There are no therapists designated for this fund, so the money can be used at your discretion, whether it’s to continue seeing your current therapist, to see a therapist for the first time, or to pay for your medication.”

### *Apps and online tools for self-care*

- [Insight Timer](#): A free library of thousands of guided meditations
- [PTSD Coach](#): Developed by the VA, the app provides education about PTSD, information about professional care, self assessment and tools to manage stresses of daily life with PTSD.
- [Mindfulness Coach](#): Developed by the VA, the app has been

shown to be effective in reducing stress, increasing self awareness and helping with anxiety and depression.

- [\*\*Insomnia Coach\*\*](#): Developed by the VA, the app is based on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia.
- [\*\*COVID Coach\*\*](#): Developed by the VA, the app supports self-care and overall mental health during the pandemic.
- [\*\*Provider Resilience\*\*](#): The app is designed to help users to stay emotionally healthy while remaining productive. Although it's designed for health-care providers, it can be useful for journalists.

### *Resources for managers*

- [\*\*Tips for Managers and Editors\*\*](#) (Dart Center): “These tips are for managers and editors to help them prepare and support the reporters who do this difficult and important work.”
- [\*\*Leading Resilience: A Guide for Editors and News Managers on Working with Freelancers Exposed to Trauma\*\*](#) (Dart Center): “A collaboration between ACOS Alliance and Dart Centre Asia Pacific, this guide is designed to help editors and managers understand and support their teams. It is divided into five sections covering both general information and specific suggestions and tips for working with freelancers.”
- [\*\*Managing Stress & Trauma on Investigative Projects\*\*](#) (Dart Center): “A tip sheet from [Dart’s] Executive Director Bruce Shapiro, originally released at the 2005 Investigative Reporters & Editors Annual Conference.”
- [\*\*How to add well-being to a newsroom natural disaster plan\*\*](#) (Radio Television Digital News Association): “Here are five strategies that are musts for any news team.”
- [\*\*Newsroom depression: Warning signs and strategies\*\*](#) (RTDNA): “News directors, you have a stressful enough job to deliver ratings, hire the right people and do the best you can to manage up every day. Pay attention. Here is a

checklist of some of journalists' vulnerabilities to emotional illnesses.”

- [\*\*Are you ready for trauma in your newsroom? New research may help\*\*](#) (RTDNA): “Managers who may have never experienced large-scale shocking events may lack needed experience to successfully navigate staff through unexpected emotional landmines. In Oklahoma City the [news] leaders learned [these lessons.]”
- [\*\*Staff care tips for managers and editors of news personnel exposed to traumatic events\*\*](#) (Dart Center): “Trauma and the coverage of extreme human distress is a core part of journalism. It can be important and deeply rewarding – but it can also affect us personally.... These tips are offered as suggestions to assist healthier journalists and ultimately better journalism.”

## *Harassment*

- [\*\*Online Abuse: A Self-Defence Guide\*\*](#) (Dart Center): “Online abuse and harassment come in many forms, from borderline incivility all the way up to systematic attacks that are engineered to inflict real psychological harm. This guide offers some thoughts on managing their potential impact.”
- [\*\*Maintaining Boundaries with Sources, Colleagues & Supervisors\*\*](#) (Dart Center): “This tip sheet, drawing on interviews with nine leading women in journalism and other sources, offers strategies for recognizing, mitigating and addressing sexual harassment and other predatory behavior while reporting.”

## *How our work affects us*

- [\*\*Covering Trauma: Impact on Journalists\*\*](#) (Dart Center): “An overview of current research on the occupational hazards for journalists covering traumatic events, the risk factors that aggravate those effects, and some suggestions for mitigating those factors.”
- [\*\*How journalists' jobs affect their mental health: a research roundup\*\*](#) (The Journalist's Resource): “Journalists report on complex and difficult topics, including natural disasters, political violence and human suffering. We've summarized studies that look at how occupational stress affects journalists' mental health.”
- [\*\*Journalists are under stress. What's the solution?\*\*](#) (The Journalist's Resource): “A large body of research shows how journalists' jobs can pose a risk to their mental health. We searched these studies for tips on preventing and addressing the stress and trauma of reporting the news.”
- [\*\*News managers are traumatized, too\*\*](#) (RTDNA): “Terror attacks, natural disasters, and other deadly events send shockwaves of trauma throughout newsrooms and entire organizations. Managers can feel guilt, regret, and secondary stress reactions when the journalists they manage suffer from traumatic events.”

## *Additional resources*

- [\*\*The Dart Center Style Guide for Trauma-Informed Journalism\*\*](#): “This style guide is designed as a quick, authoritative reference for reporters, editors and producers working on tight deadlines. It includes brief evidence-informed guidance on news choices, language usage and ethics in reporting on the impact of trauma on individuals, families and

communities; recommendations for appropriate use of relevant psychological and scientific terminology; and special considerations when reporting on consequential trauma-laden issues such as racism and sexual violence.”

- [Trauma & Journalism handbook](#) (Dart Center): The handbook distills the expertise of international trauma experts.
- [Mental health and journalism](#) (International Journalists’ Network): A six-part podcast series featuring interviews with reporters and mental health experts.
- [Journalism and Trauma](#) (self-directed course on Poynter): “This course will teach you how traumatic stress affects victims and how to interview trauma victims with compassion and respect... [and] how to take care of your own health after covering a traumatic event.”
- [Covering Mass Tragedies](#): Tips, story ideas, resources and words of encouragement by members of ‘[Journalists Covering Trauma](#)’ Facebook group.
- [Covering Sensitive Issues and Coping with Trauma](#): Moderated by Pulitzer Center Campus Consortium Coordinator Hana Carey, the panel focuses on reporting on sensitive issues and recuperating from traumatic experiences in the field.
- [Mental Health for Journalists](#) (Journalist’s Toolbox): “This page features resources for journalists with mental health needs and also links for covering mental health.”
- [When the News Breaks the Journalists](#) (J-Source): “Journalists are coming out and talking honestly about mental illness.”

## About The Author



### *Naseem S. Miller*

Naseem Miller joined *The Journalist's Resource* in 2021 after working as a health reporter in local newspapers and national medical trade publications for nearly two decades. She covers health and medicine with a focus on disparities. Before joining JR, she was a senior health reporter at the *Orlando Sentinel*, where she covered the Pulse nightclub mass shooting and was part of the team that was a 2016 Pulitzer Prize finalist for its coverage of the tragedy. She co-started and administers the Journalists Covering Trauma Facebook page and frequently speaks to journalists about trauma and trauma-informed reporting. You can send her [an email](#) or find her on Twitter [@NaseemMiller](#).

# 22. Chapter 22: Student Press Law Center - Top 10 FAQs from Student Journalists

## Top 10 college FAQs

**Q: If school officials or student governments fund a student publication, website, radio or television station, can't they censor it like any other publisher or owner could?**

A: Not at a public school. The courts have ruled that if a school creates a student news medium and allows students to serve as editors, the First Amendment drastically limits the school's ability to censor. Among the censoring actions the courts have prohibited are confiscating copies of publications, requiring prior review, removing objectionable material, limiting circulation, suspending editors and withdrawing or reducing financial support. (The Supreme Court's 1988 Hazelwood ruling gives administrators at K-12 schools added leeway to censor some publications, but – with the exception of one federal court ruling impacting only Wisconsin, Indiana and Illinois – no court has given college officials the Hazelwood level of authority over student media.)

**Q: Does including “in my opinion” protect me from a libel or defamation suit?**

A: Including the phrase “in my opinion” (for example, “In my opinion, the coach is a cheater”) does not create an automatic shield to libel. Neither does simply reprinting what someone else has said. (For example, “‘The coach is a cheater,’ said Kristen Jones.”) Nor does “alleged” automatically provide protection – if someone has been accused of wrongdoing, describe the source and nature of the

accusation with specificity (“Coach Walsh, who has been accused by two opponents of cheating,” not “Coach Walsh, an alleged cheater”).

**Q: Can student media refuse to publish a lawful advertisement?**

A: Yes, as long as students – and students alone – are responsible for rejecting the ad. Where public college officials, including an adviser, play a role in refusing the ad, the law can get murky, since they are government officials subject to the First Amendment. But students are private individuals and can accept or reject ads for virtually any reason. Student media at private colleges are not subject to the First Amendment and can generally accept or reject advertisements at will.

**Q: Am I in danger of getting sued for defamation or invasion of privacy?**

A: Rarely, but it can happen, and you need to observe professional standards if you want your work to be taken seriously. You can’t be liable for defamation if you just publish a critical opinion about someone or reveal an unpleasant truth. But if you make a false accusation of fact, you may have committed defamation. Invasion of privacy occurs when a publication publicizes embarrassing personal information without consent and with no newsworthy justification. It can also happen if you mislabel a photo so that it gives a false impression that harms a person’s reputation (“false light”).

**Q: Is my newspaper legally responsible for online comments or social media?**

A: Generally no. The Safe Harbor of the Communications Decency Act says that no provider of a Web site is responsible for text provided by a non-staff user, except in cases of copyright infringement. There’s a separate safe harbor provision in the Digital Millennium Copyright Act that requires you to fill out a form and pay a one-time fee with the Copyright Office, but if you do that, text in comments or other copyrighted content posted by members of the public shouldn’t create any liability for the publication. Remember, though, that information posted by staff members wouldn’t fall under the safe harbor.

**Q: Can I reprint a picture found via Google or social media?**

A: Sometimes, but not usually, and you need to do some research to figure out whether or not you can. There are two primary areas of the law you need to worry about: copyright and privacy. From the copyright perspective, you need to be making a fair use of the work, or you need permission from the owner. Check the SPLC Web site to read up on these topics, but as a general rule, unless you know who owns the image and how they're using it, you can't make a fair use. In other words, Google image search will almost never be a safe place to stop.

**Q: Can I use an image from the internet if I credit where it came from?**

A: This is a common misconception. As much as journalism cares about crediting images, the law really doesn't. Nothing in copyright law will give you any greater right to use an image just because you credited it. It's nice to credit it correctly, but it's not something copyright law has any interest in, at least as far as publications are concerned.

**Q: Can student reporters protect confidential news sources or information when they receive a court subpoena asking them to turn it over?**

A: In most cases, yes. Some states have "shield laws" and others have court-created reporters' privileges that protect journalists from having to reveal this kind of information. Most states have never explicitly applied these laws to student journalists, and the language in a few of them may not protect students. You should check your state law.

**Q: How can I make use of freedom of information laws? And what about private schools?**

A: Freedom of information, or "sunshine" laws, require that government agencies such as public schools and police departments open up to the public most of their official records and meetings. These laws, which vary from state to state, are usually simple to use and often require that a journalist simply make an informal request. Every newsroom should have a copy of their state's open records and open meetings laws. There are a number

of state and federal laws that now require private schools to reveal certain information, including the institution's federal informational tax return, the IRS Form 990, which the law says this form must be available at the school's business office for public inspection. The form provides information about where your school gets its money and how it spends it.

**Q: How should an editor respond to a community member asking that a story be removed from our publication's website or social media?**

A: If the material is lawful – that is, it is not defamatory nor an invasion of the individual's privacy – the fact that someone finds it embarrassing or bothersome does not obligate you to take it down. Additionally, it is important to remember that material that was lawful at the time of its original publication does not become improper with the passage of time – a publication cannot be held liable for its failure to update a past news article. It is helpful to be prepared for these situations by developing a standing policy for dealing with “takedown” demands.

# 23. Chapter 23: The Rise of Citizen Journalism

## [From Journalism 101: Libertext](#)

**1970:** A journalist stands outside the Supreme Court, anxiously waiting for the Court's decision on a case. While she waits, she also sifts through her thick folder of B-matter (background info) that she plans to reference in her hard news piece. An hour later, the Court issues its decision. An official representing the Court speaks to the journalists camped around the Court and relays the verdict. The Supreme Court's work is done, but the journalist's work has just begun. She heads back to the newsroom and produces her piece, then spends another hour to work in her editor's feedback. Later, her efforts pay off: Her editor is happy with the final draft and sends it off to the newspaper's layout team. The journalist's piece is formatted into the front page, and the layout team carefully checks the rest of the newspaper before sending it off to the printing press. The next morning, the journalist's story is on hundreds of thousands of doorsteps, printed underneath the venerable New York Times logo.

**2012:** A young college student is at a rally outside the Supreme Court, reading [SCOTUSBlog](#) (an acclaimed blog following Supreme Court news, sponsored by Bloomberg Law) on his phone. He's anxiously waiting for the Court's decision on the Affordable Care Act. A few seconds later, he notices a new SCOTUSBlog post; it announces that the Supreme Court did uphold the Act as constitutional. He yells the news to his fellow classmates; they erupt in cheers. Amid the cheering he opens up the Twitter app on his iPhone and tweets, "The court has spoken! They've upheld the Affordable Healthcare Act! #Obamacare." His tweet is now visible to Twitter's [241 million monthly active users](#).

Before the advent of the Internet, the production and dissemination of information was limited to a select few. Only the publishers of books, magazines, and newspapers had the printing presses and delivery services capable of printing information and sharing it with a few million people. Published news pieces came from professional journalists. Publishing content was more of a privilege than a right.

Today, anyone can publish content online. In a matter of seconds, anyone—regardless of age, education, or experience—can create a blog or Twitter account and write or tweet about local events. A high school student can write about a presidential rally in her town in a blog post and put it online for anyone to see. No longer are the pages of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* the only purveyors of news content; the Internet has democratized the nature of writing and publishing. It has [democratized the nature of journalism](#).

But in an Internet age, is any news-oriented blogger or Twitter user a replacement for the traditional journalist? Or are these “citizen journalists”—the technology-empowered masses—another part of the journalism ecosystem that complements traditional journalists and their work? Ultimately, citizen journalists play a significant role in the journalism world, but they are not a replacement for traditional journalists and publications like *The New York Times*. Optimally, citizen journalists and traditional journalists work together toward the same goal: to tell the news and stay true to the story. To understand the role of the citizen journalist and what differentiates them from traditional journalists, we need to define who citizen journalists are and what they do.

## Defining the Citizen Journalist

A **citizen journalist** is a non-professional reporter who plays “an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating news and information,” according to the [American Press Institute](#). A person who performs one or a combination of these actions is creating or spreading news and is thus a part of the journalistic ecosystem. For instance, thousands of people in the Northeast became citizen journalists during the October 2012 earthquake in Maine and its surrounding states. Many took pictures of any earthquake damage and posted the images on Twitter—an instance of news information collection. More tweeted about their location and the severity of the earthquake in their area. The Weather Channel even compiled people’s pictures and tweets about the earthquake to help contextualize its intensity and scope.

Citizen journalists can also perform valuable news analyses, even if they do not have an academic background in news writing. Before Nate Silver became a famous statistician and election poll analyst at *The New York Times*, he was a citizen journalist. Back in 2008 and preceding his career at *The Times*, Nate Silver performed his statistical analysis on his own blog, [FiveThirtyEight.com](#). On his then-independent blog, he correctly predicted the electoral outcome of 49 states in the 2008 presidential election. Using his statistics skills, he also correctly predicted the results of 35 Senate races that year. Citizen journalists, like Nate Silver circa 2008, may offer unique analytical skills that might not otherwise be found among trained career journalists. The Internet and social media make it possible for people with considerable skills and expertise to share their insights.

Today, most information is spread through the Internet and social media. The tendency for some online content to go **viral**—become extremely popular across several social networks—can help spread important news. Citizen journalists are responsible for disseminating news via social media and encouraging their peers to

follow current affairs. Their contributions help foster a more news-oriented population.

To gain a deeper understanding of how citizen journalists interact with the news, we must first understand their preferred social networks, like Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, and more.

## Tools of the Trade

### Twitter

Twitter is a social network that allows people to “tweet” 280-character messages and pictures out to the world (as long as their profile is not private). Users can “follow” one another to receive each other’s tweets. Tweets can also be grouped into topics if they contain “hashtags,” or phrases that start with the # symbol and are followed by a search term. #election2012 is one example of a hashtag, which Twitter users created to group together tweets about the 2012 presidential election. Finally, Twitter users can “retweet” (repost) each other’s tweets to show their own followers and increase a tweet’s popularity.

Due to the concise nature of all the information shared on Twitter, the social network is useful for collecting bits of information, like pictures documenting events ranging from political rallies to local fires. Twitter can also be used for live reporting: People can tweet as new developments arise and keep other people up-to-date with a current event. Twitter is especially valuable for instantly sharing bites of information with a large audience. Thanks to the hashtag function, tweets about a topic can

be compiled in one place for someone to easily read and share. Anyone can access Twitter and see public tweets, even without an account.

## Blogs/Websites

Blog posts are text entries of unlimited length; these posts can also incorporate photos. While blogging can take place on many platforms—[WordPress](#), [Typepad](#), and [Tumblr](#), to name a few—all blogs are simply websites where one can publish blog posts. Given that blogs have no space constraints, they permit citizen journalists to write longer pieces, such as news analysis.

## YouTube

YouTube is different from Twitter and blogs in that it's a site entirely dedicated to uploading and sharing videos. Any person with a video camera or a smartphone can film events and post the videos online for anyone to access. Citizen journalists are not restricted to text and picture reporting; they can also record information and report via videos uploaded on YouTube.

### The Ever-Expanding World of Social

The world of social media is changing faster than we can keep up. Different platforms are more popular in some countries than others, or with different age groups. If people want to raise the profile of an issue, posts that go viral are a good way to go. But you don't have to go viral to reach a lot of people. For a good snapshot of who is using which social media where, check out this article, [The Rise of Social](#)

[Media](#), by [Esteban Ortiz-Ospina from OurWorldinData.org](#), which is where the graph below comes from:

Social Media Users

## The Strengths of Citizen Journalism

Before the Internet, most people did not immediately know about significant events unless they regularly listened to or watched the news. Often, they would have to wait until the news appeared in the newspaper the next morning. But today, because of citizen journalism, news stories can reach the world instantly. Eyewitnesses can collect and report information using social media, circulating their news among a vast online audience. The news is as immediate as ever in the age of citizen journalism.

Information collected by citizen journalists has also become valuable for traditional journalists. In areas experiencing intense conflict, like the Gaza Strip and Israel in November 2012, people tweeted about rocket impacts or explosions and gave traditional journalists [information](#) about the latest attacks. Citizen journalists can also report on lesser-known news items. Take, for example, the blogger Chan Myae Khine, who wrote a [blog post](#) about a crackdown on monks protesting plans for a Chinese-financed mine in Myanmar. Khine's post is specific and unaddressed by the mainstream news media. Citizen journalists like Khine can spread international news stories that most newspapers cannot (or do not) always cover.

Sometimes citizen journalists gather news on conflicts that traditional journalists cannot. In [Syria](#), where a brutal civil war is playing out, brave citizen journalists are risking their lives to report

on the conflict by pursuing any action, filming footage (later to be put on YouTube), and tweeting about developments.

<https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/zOvinFYgGA8?vq=hd1080&wmode=opaque>

Traditional journalists—who cannot gain safe access to Syria—may rely on reporting done by citizen journalists for their hard news and feature stories. As traditional journalists work with citizen journalists, a key question emerges: Can the public and traditional journalists always rely on the work done by citizen journalists?

## The Caveats of Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalists are met with skepticism over two concerns: the objectivity and quality of their work. It's easy for citizen journalists to imbue their reporting with their own opinions—after all, they work through social media, which, unlike the newsroom, is informal. A plaque of journalistic principles does not hang in front of them every time they log on. Citizen journalists have more liberty to express their own opinions, and the integration of their beliefs into their reporting can compromise the truthfulness of their work.

Some citizen journalists admit to editing their text or footage to advance their views. Omar Telawi, a Syrian video journalist with no formal journalism training, admitted to the news service Channel 4 that he used special effects in his YouTube videos of the sieged city of Homs. He added extra smoke to the video clips, making Homs appear more desolate. In an interview with Channel 4, Telawi said he did not regret editing the videos. He wanted Syrian rebels to pay more attention to Homs and fight Syrian president Bashir al-Assad's forces there.

The quality of citizen journalists' work varies widely. They may not

know the difference between hard news and feature stories, as most have never received formal journalistic training. Their news-related blog posts may not constitute actual news articles. Yet citizen journalists can produce high-quality information by documenting news events with their smartphones, cameras, and Twitter accounts. Citizen journalists generate information that traditional journalists can use in “traditional” news; their blog posts offer perspectives and insights that traditional journalists can reference in hard news or feature stories.

Citizen journalists and traditional journalists indeed work together as they aim to share news and inform the public. *The New York Times* often cites people’s tweets in articles. Julian Assange, the citizen journalist and infamous mind behind [WikiLeaks](#)—the website that releases government reports to call for governmental transparency—worked with *The New York Times* to spread information that WikiLeaks had found in U.S. State Department diplomatic cables. Nate Silver’s FiveThirtyEight blog even became a part of *The New York Times*, beginning in August 2010. There is a symbiotic relationship at play: citizen journalists effectively collect information and report it through the Internet, and this information is used by traditional journalists and news organizations. This relationship allows for professional news organizations to fact-check citizen journalist reports and ensure their accuracy.

Perhaps, in the future, citizen journalists will become more independent from newspapers and will gain recognition for their own news writing. The organization [GlobalVoices](#), started by Rebecca MacKinnon, a former CNN bureau chief, and Ethan Zuckerman, director of the [MIT Center for Civic Media](#), unites citizen journalists and provides some journalistic training over the Internet. GlobalVoices can empower citizen journalists to produce news pieces equivalent to those found in traditional newsprint.

The nature of citizen journalism is in flux, and the role of the citizen in the journalism ecosystem is yet to be defined. Even so, their importance in the world of journalism is undeniable. As journalists move into the digital age, familiarity with citizen

journalism and its strengths and limitations will only become more important.

# 24. Chapter 24: 10 Study-based story ideas for community journalists

Suggested ways to use scholarly research as a lens through which to see events in a reporter's area.

Published at [The Journalist's Resource](#) by [John Wihbey](#) | May 18, 2011 |

Journalist's Resource encourages using scholarly research as a lens through which to see local events. Stories on a variety of topics – from immigration to water quality – can be enriched by referencing scholarly research and findings. Such data and insights can provide meaningful context that can elevate a reported piece and give it greater resonance.

Browsing research can also help stimulate new story ideas.

This site has a [wider library of studies](#) that might be useful in this way; and here are 10 representative studies that might be localized by reporters:

1. **Report on the dynamics between drivers and bicyclists on the roads.** In recent years, many cities and towns have shown significant increases in bicycling. What's happening in your community? Two pieces of research can provide frameworks: a study from the Harvard School of Public Health, "[Risk of Injury for Bicycling on Cycle Tracks Versus in the Street](#)," and a study from Monash University, Australia, "[Identifying Risk Factors for On-road Commuter Cyclists](#)." Is there tension between drivers and cyclists in your area? Has your municipality made physical and legal provisions for cyclists, and are they effective? How law-abiding are drivers and cyclists? Can you get statistics on accidents and incidents in your area?

2. **Track how public closed-caption television cameras are being used in your community.** An analysis from Northeastern University and the University of Cambridge, [“Public Area CCTV and Crime Prevention: An Updated Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.”](#) concludes that cameras are more effective in some areas than others. Where are the cameras on your beat? Is there a coherent strategy behind where they are placed? How do citizens feel about them?
3. **Examine the impact of curfew ordinances in your community.** A study from the University of California, Berkeley, [“Impact of Juvenile Curfew Laws on Arrests of Youth and Adults.”](#) shows that curfew restrictions lead to fewer crimes committed by both minors and young adults. Does your community have such a law or has it considered one? What’s the perspective of law enforcement? Of teens? Has additional manpower been provided to enforce the curfew? Is the added expense worth it?
4. **Look at vacant lots from the perspective of health and safety.** A study from the University of Pennsylvania, [“Analysis of Health, Safety, and the Greening of Vacant Urban Space.”](#) looked at how improving urban acres can positively change community behaviors. Sociologists are interested in how both “broken window” and “incivilities” theories can play out in urban environments. How many vacant lots are in your community? What’s the history behind them? How do residents and law enforcement officials feel about them?
5. **Assess how much food waste is in your community and what is done about it.** A study from the U.N.’s Food and Agriculture Organization, [“The Progressive Increase of Food Waste in America and Its Environmental Impact.”](#) looks at increases in the amount of food that is typically discarded, and the environmental consequences. Another study, this one from Columbia University, [highlights](#) how discarded plastic items may be potential sources of energy. How much waste is thrown away by schools, restaurants or other businesses in your

community? A typical household? Is there anything that can be done in your area to reduce the amount of waste?

6. **Determine the extent your community encourages business and industry opportunities through tax breaks.** A study for the National Bureau of Economic Research, [“Who Offers Tax-Based Business Development Incentives?”](#) finds a connection between communities that offer more tax breaks for businesses and instances of federal corruption. To what extent does your community’s business development strategy focus on tax breaks? How popular are these incentives with businesses? Do policymakers potentially benefit from this arrangement? What are some alternative strategies for enticing businesses to operate in your community?
7. **Take account of municipal greenery and plantings patterns.** Ask how local residents feel about the way this is being done over time. A University of Pennsylvania study, [“What Is a Tree Worth? Green-City Strategies, Signaling and Housing Prices.”](#) shows how curbside tree planting programs in Philadelphia affected home values. Is your city or town doing a good job on this front? What about condo associations and neighborhood groups?
8. **See how well the local school system educates girls about politics.** A study from the University of Missouri, [“Gender Differences in Political Knowledge: Distinguishing Characteristics-Based and Returns-Based Differences.”](#) suggests that the U.S. education system produces better results for boys in terms of instilling political knowledge. What are children in your area taught in lower-level civics courses? How about in high school history and contemporary issues courses? How do girls feel about the curriculum from this perspective?
9. **Investigate how your community handles smoking in public places.** A study for the National Bureau of Economic Research, [“Public-Place Smoking Laws and Exposure to Environmental Tobacco Smoke.”](#) finds that bans on smoking in

public spaces successfully reduce exposure to secondhand smoke. Where do smokers gather outside in your community to smoke? What are the smoking rules in your community's public areas? In restaurants or bars? Have changes in smoking permissions met with approval or criticism, or impacted businesses' profits?

10. **Evaluate your municipal “information environment.”** A report from Pew, Knight and the Monitor Institute, [“How the Public Perceives Community Information Systems.”](#) suggests that how communities share information – particularly as it pertains to municipal government – relates to the strength of citizen activism, engagement and satisfaction. How would you rate your city, county or state's website? Are steps taken to make sure citizens are “plugged in”? Are citizens satisfied with the level of information they receive and to which they have access?

# 25. Chapter 25: Back-to-school story ideas, new angles and useful research: From teacher quality issues to student locker rooms

2015 collection of story ideas and related research for journalists wanting to find new angles and topics to enhance their annual “back to school” coverage.

Published by [the Journalist's Resource](#) by [Denise-Marie Ordway](#) | August 13, 2015 |

Summer is quickly coming to an end and that means journalists nationwide will be scrambling to find new angles for their annual “back to school” coverage. We at Journalist's Resource are trying to make their jobs easier. So we've come up with a bunch of story ideas that center around five attention-getting topics. We have even included links to compelling research – to give reporters a jump start and round out their work. It is a reminder, in any case, that there is [deeper research](#) that can inform almost any education story.

## 1. Teacher qualities

As school principals start releasing class schedules and holding meet-the-teacher events, some families inevitably will worry about

how their children will be affected by their teacher's experience level, age and background. Academic research has begun establishing more precisely just how [long-lasting teachers' impacts can be](#). Some parents will wonder whether children will benefit or be shortchanged when assigned to a teacher who's straight out of college. Some will worry that the most veteran educators will lag behind when it comes to incorporating technology into the classroom. Some moms and dads will want to know whether students are best served by teachers who match their racial or ethnic backgrounds or by those who have achieved National Board certification.

Journalists have lots of options when approaching the topic of teacher qualities. They can focus on one area of parental concern – or explore them all in a single article. Another angle to look at: Given your school district's size and demographics, are local administrators working to hire more of a particular type of teacher and why or why not?

**Some research to consider:**

**[“Returns to Teacher Experience: Student Achievement and Motivation in Middle School”](#)**

Ladd, Helen F.; Sorensen, Lucy C. Working paper for the National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research, March 2014.

**Summary:** This working paper, which focuses on teachers and students in North Carolina, indicates that greater teacher experience is correlated with higher test scores as well as improvements in student behavior and absenteeism.

**[“Early Retirement Incentives and Student Achievement”](#)**

Fitzpatrick, Maria; Lovenheim, Michael. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 2014, Vol. 6. doi: 10.3386/w19281.

**Summary:** This working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research looks at the effects of large-scale teacher retirements on student achievement. The study concluded that

replacing more experienced teachers with less experienced teachers did not reduce test scores in Illinois in the mid-1990s. The authors found that an Early Retirement Incentives program had positive effects on test scores, particularly for schools serving large numbers of poor students.

**[“Teacher Perceptions of Using Mobile Phones in the Classroom: Age Matters!”](#)**

O’Bannon, Blanche W.; Thomas, Kevin. *Computers & Education*, May 2014, Vol. 74. doi: 10.1016/j.compedu.2014.01.006.

**Summary:** This study, which involved 1,095 teachers from two states in the Southeast, found that teachers who were aged 50 and older were “significantly less supportive” than younger teachers in allowing the use of mobile phones in the classroom. The teachers aged 50 and older also perceived the barriers to using mobile phones in class – for example, access to inappropriate material – to be more problematic than the younger groups did.

**[“Representation in the Classroom: The Effect of Own-race Teachers on Student Achievement”](#)**

Egalite, Anna J.; Kisida, Brian; Winters, Marcus A. *Economics of Education Review*, April 2015, Vol. 45. doi: 10.1016/j.econedurev.2015.01.007.

**Summary:** For this study, researchers estimated changes in achievement levels as students in Florida public schools were assigned to teachers of different races and ethnic backgrounds from 2001–2002 through 2008–2009. They found “small but significant positive effects” when black and white students had teachers of the same race or ethnic background for reading class and for black, white and Asian/Pacific Island students in math. The study found that lower-performing black and white students seemed to particularly benefit when assigned to race-congruent teachers.

**[“Connectedness and Expectations: How Minority Teachers Can Improve Educational Outcomes for Minority Students”](#)**

Atkins, Danielle N.; Fertig, Angela R.; Wilkins, Vicky M. *Public Management Review*, May 2014, Vol. 16. doi: 10.1080/14719037.2013.841981.

**Summary:** This study explores whether the presence of minority teachers affects minority students' educational aspirations and how "connected" they feel to their school. The authors found that having more black and Hispanic teachers raised educational expectations for black students while having more Hispanic teachers increased Hispanic students' educational expectations and their sense of connectedness.

**["It's Easier to Pick a Good Teacher than to Train One: Familiar and New Results on the Correlates of Teacher Effectiveness"](#)**

Chingos, Matthew M.; Peterson, Paul E. *Economics of Education Review*, June 2011, Vol. 30. doi: 10.1016/j.econedurev.2010.12.010.

**Summary:** This study indicates that teachers with certifications from the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards are more effective at least in some areas. The authors conclude that National Board certification is correlated with student achievement in math and reading at the elementary and middle school levels.

## **2. Animals on campus**

College officials are getting requests from students who want to bring animals to campus to help them fight anxiety, depression and other mental-health disorders. In some cases, students want to keep their "emotional support animals" – dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs and the like – in dorms and university apartments that have no-pet policies. Administrators are wrestling with how to handle the disruptions that can be caused by support animals, which often are not trained but are prescribed by a doctor, while also following the law as it relates to both the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Fair Housing Act.

Anti-discrimination laws require airlines, restaurants and other businesses to permit emotional support animals even though [some people complain](#). Journalists wanting to explore this topic from a

higher-education perspective should ask local colleges and universities how they are handling such requests – and whether they are getting more of them. It's critical to talk to students and school employees to get a sense of whether – and how – the trend is impacting campus life. Representatives from programs such as [International Assistance Dog Week](#) can weigh in on problems of people trying to pass off their pets as emotional support animals or service animals.

**Some research to consider:**

**[“Emotional Support Animals, Service Animals, and Pets on Campus”](#)**

Von Bergen, C.W. *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research*, Spring 2015, Vol. 5. doi: 10.5929/2015.5.1.3.

**Summary:** This report, from an industrial psychologist and professor of management, looks at the issue of domesticated animals being allowed on college campuses from a historical and legal perspective.

**[“The Americans with Disabilities Act and Higher Education 25 Years Later: An Update on the History and Current Disability Discrimination Issues for Higher Education”](#)**

Rothstein, Laura. *Journal of College and University Law*, July 2015, Vol. 41.

**Summary:** In this article, a law professor at the University of Louisville highlights important issues related to the Americans with Disabilities Act and higher education. Emotional support animals are among the topics to which this article suggests college officials should give their attention.

**[“Effectiveness of Animal-assisted Therapy: A Systematic Review of Randomized Controlled Trials”](#)**

Kamioka, H.; et al. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*, April 2014, Vol. 22. doi: 10.1016/j.ctim.2013.12.016.

**Summary:** These researchers suggest that animal-assisted therapy, under certain conditions, may be an effective treatment for disorders such as depression, schizophrenia and alcohol and drug addiction. They indicate that the randomized controlled trials that had been conducted up to the time of this review were “of relatively low quality.”

**[“Construct Validity of Animal-Assisted Therapy and Activities: How Important Is the Animal in AAT?”](#)**

Marino, Lori. *Anthrozoos*, 2012, Vol. 25. 10.2752/175303712X13353430377219.

**Summary:** The author of this study concludes that the effects of animal-assisted activities and animal-assisted therapy “are likely to be moderate and broad at best and that, although improving, the literature has not yet reached an experimentally rigorous enough level to provide a definitive robust conclusion about the effectiveness of these approaches, particularly with regard to the question of whether a live animal is necessary for a therapeutic effect.”

### **3. Showering after gym class**

How often do students shower after physical education? For many students entering middle school, the coming school year will mark the first time they have ever changed clothes or bathed among strangers. Exploring the reasons that many students don't use the locker room showers can make for a strong piece of journalism that will get people talking. Some reporters, however, might want to delve into the issue further by looking at the consequences of the trend. Sitting behind a smelly adolescent may make it difficult for anyone to concentrate in class. There also are health concerns – medical experts say that showering immediately after exercise helps [prevent Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus \(MRSA\) Infections](#). Reporters also can use this issue as a springboard for a serious, meaningful conversation about bullying in locker rooms

or how the lack of privacy in shower facilities might discourage some students from participating fully in physical education.

**Some research to consider:**

**[“Sixth-Grade Physical Education: An Acculturation of Bullying and Fear”](#)**

O’Connor, Jamie A.; Graber, Kim C. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 2015, Volume 85. doi: 10.1080/02701367.2014.930403.

**Summary:** This study looks at how the environment and culture of physical education can foster bullying. The researchers suggest that adults – parents and gym teachers – promote a culture of peer harassment through action and inaction. The researchers point out that locker rooms are “vulnerable spaces” because students must undress in front of their peers, sometimes without full supervision by an adult.

**[“Swimming Upstream: Faculty and Staff Members From Urban Middle Schools in Low-Income Communities Describe Their Experience Implementing Nutrition and Physical Activity Initiatives”](#)**

Bauer, K.W.; Patel, A.; Prokop, L.A.; Austin, S.B. *Preventing Chronic Disease*, April 2006, Vol. 3.

**Summary:** This report covers a range of topics, including how the lack of privacy in locker rooms and shower facilities may discourage some middle school students from fully participating in physical education.

**[“Associations Between Showering Behaviours Following Physical Education, Physical Activity and Fitness in English Schoolchildren”](#)**

Sandercock, Gavin R.H.; Ogunleye, Ayodele; Voss, Christine. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 2014. doi: 10.1080/17461391.2014.987321.

**Summary:** This study of English high school students found that 53% of boys and 68% of girls reported never showering after

physical education. The researchers also found that students who did not shower were less active and engaged in fewer team sports.

#### **4. Dual enrollment**

Students who want to earn college credit while they complete their high school diplomas often have the option of dual enrolling – an option that can save a lot of time and money. Typically, students who meet certain age and grade point-average requirements can enroll at their high school and a local community college or public university. While the program is generally a popular one, there is sometimes disagreement among government agencies about who should shoulder the cost of the program – the school district, the college, the state or the students themselves. Questions frequently arise about the quality of dual-enrollment courses, especially as they compare to courses that can be taken for college credit through the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs.

The start of a new school year is a good time to write about dual enrollment because local programs frequently change as budgets are cut or high schools and colleges run short on classroom space. Journalists who want to explore this issue should find out how the dual-enrollment program works in their communities and how it has changed over time, particularly in recent years. It is important to note whether most dual-enrollment courses are taught by high school teachers at a high school or if students travel to the college campus to learn from college faculty. Journalists should pay attention to who uses the program – for example, are most of the students white or is the group racially diverse? – and whether students are completing the courses and continuing to work toward a college degree after high school.

#### **Some research to consider:**

[“Dual Credit/Dual Enrollment and Data Driven Policy Implementation”](#)

Lichtenberger, Eric; et al. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 2014, Vol. 38. doi: 10.1080/10668926.2013.790305.

**Summary:** This study found that students who participated in dual enrollment were more likely to enroll at both four-year institutions and community colleges after graduating high school.

**[“A Comparison of Learning Outcomes for Dual-enrollment Mathematics Students Taught by High School Teachers Versus College Faculty”](#)**

Hebert, Laura. *Community College Review*, 2001.

**Summary:** This researcher tracked students who took dual-enrollment math courses through a large community college over a five-year period. The study indicates that students who had high school teachers for dual-enrollment math courses earned significantly better grades in subsequent classes at public universities compared to students who had taken dual-enrollment classes taught by college faculty.

**[“Determinants of Students’ Success: The Role of Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment Programs”](#)**

Speroni, Cecilia. Working paper for the National Center for Postsecondary Research at Columbia University, November 2011.

**Summary:** This study, which analyzed data taken from two cohorts of all high school students in Florida, suggests that students who took dual-enrollment courses are more likely than those who took Advanced Placement courses to go to college after high school. Students who took dual-enrollment courses were less likely, though, to enroll at four-year institutions. The researcher noted that the positive trend applies to dual-enrollment students who took their classes at a community college. There was no corresponding positive effect for dual-enrollment students who took courses at a high school.

## **5. College student debt**

More than 40 million Americans are [repaying \\$1.2 trillion](#) in

outstanding student loan debt. College debt is a big worry for students and their families as well as lawmakers who want to improve higher-education access and affordability. Presidential candidates are focusing on [debt reduction and tuition-free public colleges](#) as they campaign.

There are a number of ways journalists can approach the issue of student debt from a local angle. One way is to look at the rising cost of the various things college students need. The rising prices of university housing and campus meal plans – two key expenses – are often overshadowed by the intense and ongoing debate over increasing tuition. Journalists should take advantage of the opportunity to talk with families as students begin moving into dorms and campus apartments in late August and early September.

Some things to ask about: Are students required to live on campus and purchase a food plan? How much have prices changed in recent years and how do they compare to prices charged by other colleges and universities? Does the local college have housing facilities featuring high-end amenities such as marble counter tops, tanning beds and wave pools? How much do housing prices differ among the various options on campus? The answers to these and other questions should provide plenty of information for a solid back-to-school story.

Another college cost that does not receive a lot of media attention is student fees, which can vary widely from campus to campus and are subject to frequent increases. Many schools charge multiple fees to help fund such things as student-health services, athletics, transportation and technology. At a time when funding is uncertain and the public is pressuring colleges and universities to hold tuition rates steady, some public colleges and universities are [relying more on student fees](#) to generate income. Journalists should investigate the fees charged by local schools, asking how they are used, how much they have changed over the years and how the total amount charged for fees compares to the amount charged for tuition.

### **Some research to consider:**

### [“Student Debt Effects on Financial Well-being: Research and Policy Implications”](#)

Elliott, W.; Lewis, M. *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 2015. doi: 10.1111/joes.12124.

**Summary:** This study examines students’ dependence on loans to cover college costs and the impact that student-loan debt has on graduates’ lives in areas such as career choice, asset accumulation and retirement savings.

### [“The Role of Institutional and State Aid Policies in Average Student Debt”](#)

Monks, James. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, September 2014, Vol. 655. doi: 10.1177/0002716214539093.

**Summary:** This article looks at the various factors that affect student debt levels. The author stresses that policymakers should not focus solely on tuition but should also consider such things as state aid, graduation rates, admissions procedures and the mix of majors across students to try to understand the reasons why average student debt levels vary among higher education institutions.

### [“Higher Education and the Spectre of Variable Fees: Public Policy and Institutional Responses in the United States and the United Kingdom”](#)

Ward, David; Douglass, John Aubrey. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 2007, Vol. 18. doi: 10.1787/17269822.

**Summary:** This study looks at the shift to require students to pay for a large portion of their public-university education through variable fees. The authors discuss emerging fee structures and the policy implications of variable fee structures.

### [“Channels for Improved Performance From Living On Campus”](#)

de Araujo, Pedro; Murray, James. *American Journal of Business Education*, December 2010, Vol. 3.

**Summary:** The authors identify reasons why students who live on campus do better in school while they are living in university housing and also in subsequent semesters, even if they move off campus. The study also suggests that students who have lived on campus in the past consume less alcohol, on average, than other students.

## About The Author



### *Denise-Marie Ordway*

She joined *The Journalist's Resource* in 2015 after working as a reporter for newspapers and radio stations in the U.S. and Central America, including the *Orlando Sentinel* and *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Her work also has appeared in publications such as USA TODAY, the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Washington Post*. She has received a multitude of national, regional and state-level journalism awards and was named as a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2013 for an investigative series she led that focused on hazing and other problems at Florida A&M University. Ordway was a 2014-15 Fellow of Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism. She also serves on the board of directors of the Education Writers Association. [@DeniseOrdway](#)

# 26. Chapter 26: Writing Opinions

## [From Journalism 101: Libretext](#)

*“A language is a dialect with its own army and navy.”*

– Max Weinreich

Here, at last—the opinion pages, in which the newspaper gives you, the writer, a stage. So go ahead, leap up there into the spotlight! Twirl around; show off your sequins and your gold tooth! Finally, you are the news!

Except I’m kidding! You aren’t the news! You aren’t the news at all, not even here in the opinion pages. No, the news is still the news, flashing its pearly whites, wearing its shiny shoes. And just as in any other story in the paper, if you write an opinion piece, you have to do your legwork first: dig up the sources, gather the information, verify that it’s accurate, yadda yadda yadda. And *then* you can present this news—and your opinion about it—to the world.

But if you were yearning for more of a moment in the sun, for a place to throw that byline around just the slightest bit, then don’t despair, because here in the opinion pages, you do indeed have freedoms you don’t have elsewhere in the paper. Instead of just reporting the truth to the extent that it can be ascertained, here you can evaluate it, criticize it, ruminate on it; you can make it dance or sing or play guitar. In short, here you can take liberties with the way you write and even the way you think about the news, because here you can have your opinion and hold it dear, you can announce it to the world, and you can—and should—seduce your readers into agreeing with you.

How to do that? First, legally. As you have already learned (5,000 times), what you write in a newspaper must be the truth, and that

goes for the opinion pages too. If you write a column saying that in your opinion your English teacher assigns grades based on who brings her gifts, while in fact she actually reads your essays and assigns grades based on their quality, she can sue you for libel. And she will, because her reputation is at stake. Furthermore, even if what you write is clearly intended to be a joke, you have written something damaging and untrue, so what you wrote is **libelous**. And you can't defend yourself with the lame excuse that you meant no harm, not if a reasonable person could conclude that you caused harm and should have known you would. And you can't defend yourself by pointing out that you preceded your statements with the disclaimer, "In my opinion." If you write something untrue and damaging about another person, the disclaimer "In my opinion" is no defense.

Let's reiterate so this is clear: If you write something damaging about another person that is not true—even as a joke, even if you write, "In my opinion"—you may be sued for libel.

And so what about your OPINION then? Can't you have an opinion?! Of course you can. You can have any opinion you want *about* facts, but you can't have an opinion that something is a fact if it's not.

So you can say, "I find my teacher tedious," because to you, she is. No one can argue about that. You find her tedious; that's your reaction. However, you might be committing libel if you write, "In my opinion, my teacher doesn't prepare for class." Can you tell the difference between the two statements? One is a description of your feelings; the other is a description of her actions. If what you write about her is untrue, you could be in trouble.

Bottom line: You are entitled to your opinions; you are even entitled to your opinions about facts. But you aren't entitled to the opinion that something is a fact if it's not.

As for how to write a good opinion piece: Remember to consider your audience. If you write an editorial about policy, you may attract readers interested in systems and ideas, so your writing should be formal, direct, and professional. If you write about a person in

trouble, you will likely attract readers with empathy or curiosity about the human condition, so your writing should be descriptive, spare (of course) but evocative. If you write about a championship baseball team, your readers are as giddy as you are, so write as blithely as you please. If you write that a government must stop torturing people, you must—armed with statistics so the premise cannot be questioned—write with a clarity that does justice to your purpose and a serenity that reinforces your commitment to a principle.

Indeed, the most serious columns demand understatement—not hysteria; the lightest columns allow humor, irony, and wit; and the most emotional stories beg for details, those gems that make every human interest story come alive. Consider the audience you’ll attract and the theme of your opinion piece, and write accordingly. Get those readers interested.

## The Editorial<sup>[1]</sup>

The editorial is written by an editorial page editor and his or her staff, who are separate from the news staff. Their job, day in and day out, is not to report the news but, instead, to learn as much as possible about it and then to offer an informed opinion. The editorial represents the voice of “the newspaper,” an entity in society whose opinion is valued because that opinion is based on factual information and careful, thoughtful study. Most often, the editorial will contain the editorial staff’s opinion about the most important or most controversial news stories of the day, but editorials also commemorate events, explain them, criticize them, and celebrate them. While the rest of us are busy attending school or doing other jobs (including, perhaps, the job of a newspaper

reporter!), the editorial staff are busy reading, learning, and thinking about the topics of the day.

As outlined in [Effective Editorial Writing](#) by veteran journalism instructors Rod Vahl and H. L. Hall, there are essentially six types of editorials, many of which, in practice, will overlap and combine:

## The Editorial of Explanation

Here, the editorial explains an issue or problem. Interestingly, readers often feel passionately about an issue even when they do not really have a grasp of it; they don't understand who wields power or how, why things stand as they do, where the issue has been in the past, what's already been tried, or what remains to be done. The editorial of explanation describes these things, as well as why this issue or problem is worthy of the readers' attention and concern.

## The Editorial of Argumentation

Here, the editorial takes a stand in support of or in opposition to an action, policy, or proposal. Here, the editors want to persuade their readers; thus, the editors' writing must be clear, direct, and, above all, logical. Indeed, if you're writing an editorial of argumentation, then, by definition, there's a counterargument out there, perhaps circulating among your readers and almost certainly described in your very own news pages. You do not want to gratuitously make your opponent's case stronger by offering up a weakness in your own; therefore, you must take care to avoid all [logical fallacies](#).

## The Editorial of Criticism

Here, the editorial points out a problem. Here, the power of the editorial, its effectiveness, can actually depend on the editors' attitude. If the editors love the fact of their pointing out a problem, and if their (deep-down secret) purpose is to show their readers how smart and critical they are, then the editorial will be smart and certainly critical but also probably very limited in scope as it simply describes a problem. This sort of editorial can be entertaining in its way but also off-putting, as readers get an eyeful of the editors' energy, while the issue at hand takes a back seat to those editors' motivation. If, on the other hand, the editors' purpose is to identify a problem, examine its causes, and recommend a solution, then the editorial will clearly be less about the editors' taking a stand than about the newspaper's trying to fix something that's busted. And the readers will be grateful for the criticism and the advice. The tone? Here is the place to write like a gentleman or woman.

## The Editorial of Commendation

When someone does something terrific, editors should mark it in the pages of the newspaper. The paper contains a chronicle of a society's truth. Editorials must not be reserved exclusively for a society's problems but should chronicle its triumphs proudly.

## The Editorial of Commemoration

Here, the editors serve as a repository of the community's collective memory and thus a part of its identity by commemorating events that define the community's history or mark the passage of time in its predictable cycles. Each event added to the calendar creates

a layer of meaning: Easter, Passover, Ramadan; 7/4, 11/11, 9/11; Halloween, Thanksgiving, the Super Bowl.

## The Editorial of Entertainment

You can write them to amuse or to stress an important point, but your tone here is light and funny, and you can write in the first person plural. Go ahead, crack a joke, ruminate, be edgy if you want, and hog the spotlight, because here you have a free pass to produce some performance art. This type of piece is only off-putting when the writer is sarcastic or narcissistic, but that can't happen in an editorial, because your name's not even on the piece! Thus, an editorial of entertainment will almost surely delight the readers.

## Op-Ed Pieces

These pieces, which appear opposite the editorial page (and thus are called “op-eds”) are written by guest writers and experts. They, too, will fall in the categories above—you can write an opinion piece that's an explanation, a criticism, an argument, or a celebration. But an opinion piece carries your name, so your writing voice can be more particular than the authoritative voice you'd use in an editorial. You can write an opinion piece in the third person if you're discussing events outside your personal experience; you can write in the first person if you have direct experience with the matter at hand. You should entrance your readers, win them to your point of view—and in this battle for their attention and allegiance, your weapons are your words. Select and deploy them to your maximum advantage; pay attention to their connotations and the impact of

their sound. And above all, whenever possible, use them to tell stories.

A reporter's experience:

I once had to interview a neo-Nazi. I met him in his brightly lit basement decorated with swastika flags. He thundered away about the problems in America “all caused by n\_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with the racial slur) and Jews.” He wasn't a leader of his neo-Nazi group, just an inarticulate foot soldier. He had bad skin and a doughy, listless wife. Halfway through the interview, I told him I was Jewish. I don't know what possessed me; I think I could just tell he was on autopilot running his mouth, and I wanted to see what would happen if I threw a wrench into the machine. His mouth fell open. He literally shook his head. I started to feel sorry for him. I could just see the gears spinning behind his forehead, failing to gain traction. My interviewing him was the only interesting thing that had happened to him in years. He wanted to keep talking to me and be a big shot with a passion. But just like that, his convictions deserted him.

I wrote a proper profile about the guy but also passed along an informal set of notes to the editorial page editor who was working on a piece about the psychology of white supremacists. I wrote, “This guy is miserable in his life with his homely, surly wife, and he's not real smart. Being a Nazi, that was his fun.” The editors wanted to quote me verbatim, but I wouldn't let them. I never really talked to the wife, so my characterization was pretty superficial; plus, I didn't want her coming after me with one of those huge shotguns from the wall cabinet. What a chicken I was. But anyway, that's a little a story for you about my days as a journalist, and I offer it to remind you that whenever possible, you should embed stories in your anecdotes and your arguments. Because no one can walk away from a good story.

This [document](#), from Harvard University, contains terrific advice for writing an effective opinion piece.

## Columns

These opinion pieces are written in the first person by members of the newspaper staff or guest columnists, and the way to write these is to find a columnist you adore, read as many of her columns as you can, and try to figure out how she writes so well. Then do that. Columns are called “columns” because usually they’re laid out in a column, and they appear throughout the paper. So hunt through the news, the Living pages, Sports. Find your favorite columnist, read, and imitate. Do not fear that by doing so you’ll lose your individuality. No matter how much you are inspired by another writer, your very DNA will appear in every word you write on your own.

## Cartoons

Cartoons are extremely cool, and you must be both a clever thinker and a good artist to create them. Some illustrate stories; they should be cleanly drawn.

Others are satire, and these are more difficult to pull off. One rule, though, will help you do it: Be sure that the object of your satire—the person or thing you are criticizing—is in your drawing. For example, if you are trying to illustrate the idea that your school’s teachers don’t seem to like the students, you might draw a very ugly, very mean teacher looking with loathing at a student, right? You wouldn’t draw a big, vicious, horrible student. This seems rather obvious, but several of my students have drawn a satire of the wrong target.

A wonderful website filled with information on the history and

crafting of cartooning comes from The Ohio State University's [Opper Project](#).

Chris Britt, editorial cartoonist for *The State Journal-Register* in Springfield, Illinois, describes his process for thinking up and executing cartoons in this [video](#):

<https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/-mvK7G7MytU?vq=hd1080&wmode=opaque>

In the next [clip](#), you can watch *The Chicago Tribune*'s Scott Stantis polish off an editorial cartoon in two minutes:

[https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/4dkaEPWyi\\_k?vq=hd1080&wmode=opaque](https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/4dkaEPWyi_k?vq=hd1080&wmode=opaque)

Finally, to try your hand at creating a cartoon, follow this [study guide](#) from the Pelican Publishing Company.

#### Exercises

1. Write a short opinion piece about a controversial issue at your school. Before you start, be sure you truly know what the controversy is about, and be sure you know all the facts involved. (It won't do you any good to write an opinion piece based on inaccurate or missing facts—no one will be persuaded to your point of view, no matter how beautifully you write.) Write 400 words without worrying too much about how you craft the piece. Just get it down on paper. Then read this [link](#) from *Writer's Digest* and see how well you did. Edit your piece accordingly. Then submit it to your newspaper!
2. Write an editorial of commendation about something wonderful going on in your town or school. Don't spend much time telling the reader it's wonderful; instead, describe it in such a way that they *know* it's wonderful.
3. Write an editorial of commemoration in which you acknowledge that something significant is going on at this time in the year or in the calendar. Perhaps the leaves are falling, or

it's the first snow; perhaps it's prom time, or September 11<sup>th</sup>. Write an opinion piece in which you describe the moment and offer your thoughts about it. Connect with readers who are aware, as you are, of this significant moment, and match the tone of your voice to the tone of the event.

[1] Vahl, Rod and H. L. Hall, *Effective Editorial Writing* (Iowa City: [Quill and Scroll Foundation](#), 2000).



This is where you can add appendices or other back matter.